

MICE

There are two species of mice in Northern Ireland – the wood (or field) mouse and the house mouse. The wood mouse is a rich chocolate brown colour with a pale belly and has protruding eyes, large ears and an extremely long tail. The house mouse is a uniform greyish-brown colour with much less prominent eyes and a shorter tail.

Wood mice reached Ireland about 8000 years ago while the house mouse was probably introduced by man during prehistoric times. Both species are nocturnal. They are opportunistic foragers and will take a wide range of food such as seeds, nuts, buds, green plants, larvae, centipedes and worms. Wood mice are highly adaptable and can occupy most habitats while house mice are confined to human habitations and food stores, particular in cold winter weather. In the wild, mice dig burrows 2-3cms in diameter which often then extend to form complex system of tunnels and chambers.

Predators such as owls, foxes, stoats, badgers, cats and kestrels kill many wood mice. House mice, though vulnerable to cats, are less affected by native predators, but low temperatures, trapping and poisoning may reduce numbers.



FIELD MOUSE

RATS

There are two species of rat living wild in Northern Ireland, the brown (or common) rat and the black (or ship) rat. Both species are very similar in appearance and can be either black or brown but the black rat tends to be smaller and has a longer more slender tail.

Both species were introduced by man. The black rat probably arrived in Ireland 1,500 years ago and became widespread around human habitations. The fleas carried by this species spread the Black Death (bubonic plague) during the Middle Ages. The brown rat did not arrive until the 18th Century when it began to replace the black rat. Today black rats are confined to dockside warehouses and food stores while the brown rat is widespread. It is typically associated with farms, hedges, refuse tips, sewers, water channels and warehouses where food is plentiful and there is little competition from other species. Like mice, rats are generally nocturnal and are omnivorous. They will eat cereals, seeds, roots, insects, earthworms and green plants.

Many young rats are killed by predators such as foxes, owls, stoats and cats but adult rats may be ignored due to their large size and aggressive nature.



BLACK RAT

WILDLIFE

Mammals are a class of warm blooded vertebrates that have hairy or furry skins, although species such as whales and dolphins have very little hair. The females possess mammary glands which produce milk for the young. The mammal fauna of Ireland is much poorer than that of Great Britain, which in turn has fewer species than continental Europe. There are 26 species of terrestrial mammal in Northern Ireland today compared with 52 in Great Britain. For instance, Northern Ireland lacks moles, weasels, voles, harvest mice and dormice. One theory which may explain this discrepancy is that after the last Ice Age only a few species managed to reach Ireland before rising sea levels cut off the land bridge between Scotland and Ireland. Some species were later introduced deliberately or accidentally by man.

HEDGEHOGS

Hedgehogs are instantly recognisable by the sharp spines over their back and sides. The spines are about 2cms long and cream in colour with a dark brown band near the tip. When the animal is threatened its specialised skin muscles enable it to erect the spines and pull them down over the rest of its body as it rolls into a ball.

Hedgehogs are most abundant on the edge of woodlands or along hedgerows but they also live in town gardens where they can often be enticed on to lawns at night with a bowl of dog food. They hunt at night for invertebrates such as beetles, earthworms, larvae, centipedes, spiders and slugs. In winter they hibernate for up to six months in nests built of leaves or grass under the cover of a thicket or even a garden shed. Although their spines protect them from most predators a few hedgehogs may be taken by foxes, badgers or dogs. Road traffic causes most fatalities although many may die during their first winter hibernation.

Hedgehogs may have been introduced to Ireland by the Normans but they are now established as a common creature in our countryside.

PYGMY SHREWS

The pygmy shrew is a tiny mouse-like creature with a long pointed snout. The head and body measure 4-6cms with the tail being almost as long again.



HEDGEHOG



PYGMY SHREW

They are medium brown above and creamy white below. Pygmy shrews probably reached Ireland by the land bridge from Scotland around 8000 years ago and can now be found throughout Ireland and on many offshore islands. They are widespread in all types of habitat including woodland, moorland and grassland where they spend a lot of time above the ground but use mouse burrows or natural crevasses for shelter or breeding nests. Shrews are active both day and night hunting for invertebrate prey particularly beetles, woodlice, flies, larvae and spiders. Their saliva contains a poison which helps to immobilise large insect prey. They can eat more than their own body weight in food each day.

Many shrews are killed by owls, foxes, stoats and cats but they are rarely eaten, probably because they taste unpleasant.

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

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BATS

Bats are the only mammals capable of true flight. In Northern Ireland there are eight species of bat, all of which live exclusively on insects and spiders. Ireland as a whole has 9 species while Great Britain is home to 17 species. Bats are structurally very similar to other mammals except that their forearms and hands are modified into wings. The wing membrane is supported by the fingers which are greatly elongated. This membrane is often damaged during flight but can repair itself quite quickly.

A further membrane joins the legs and tail and is stiffened along the lower edge by a bony calcar. The knee bends forwards instead of backwards so that the tail membrane can be used to control flight or to scoop up insects. Bats are generally nocturnal although they seem to emerge from their roosts in twilight. They locate insects in the air or on vegetation by echolocation, a kind of sonar. High pitched sounds are emitted from the bat’s nose or mouth, depending on the species, and the returning ‘picture’ is picked up by the ears.

NORTHERN IRISH BATS	HABITAT	DIET	ROOST
Pipistrelle	Many	Caddis flies and small insects	Buildings/trees
Leislars	Woods	Flies and larvae	Trees/buildings
Daubentons	Open Woods/Water	Flies and caddis flies	Buildings/caves/trees
Whiskered	Woods/open country	Small insects	Buildings/caves/trees
Natterers	Open Woods	Moths and caddis flies	Buildings/caves/trees
Brown long-eared	Open woods	Large moths	Buildings/trees



BAT

HARES

There are two species of hare in Northern Ireland, the native Irish hare and the brown hare which was introduces into western Ulster by coursing clubs. The Irish hare is the smaller of the two and can be distinguished by its all white tail and relatively shorter ears. Both hares have long legs that enable them to run very fast. Their speed and keen eyesight protect them from most predators.

Hares are found in most habitats from sea-level to mountains but are most numerous on lowland grasslands especially farm pastures. Hares are usually nocturnal but are often seen during the day. They do not dig burrows, normally resting above ground in a hollow called a form. Lowland hares eat mainly grasses and dandelions, while in hills, sedges and heather shoots are also eaten. The fox is the main predator.



HARE



RABBIT



RED SQUIRREL



GREY SQUIRREL

RABBITS

Rabbits are a common sight grazing in fields around dawn and dusk. They are smaller than hares and their ears are relatively shorter. Most rabbits are greyish brown but colours vary from sandy yellow to black. Occasionally an all-white albino rabbit may be seen.

Rabbits are not native to Ireland but were introduced by the Normans for meat and fur. By the 17th Century extensive warrens were managed throughout Northern Ireland, from where rabbits escaped to start wild colonies. Numbers increased dramatically until the disease myxomatosis decimated the population in 1954.

The best habitat for rabbits is grassland with sites suitable for burrows nearby. Sand dunes or fields bordered by banks or hedges are ideal. Rabbits eat a wide range of plants especially succulent species like fescue grass and dandelions. They can severely damage crops and young tree plantations although they help to maintain many grassland habitats by preventing course species from taking over.

The level of mortality is high due to predators – foxes, badgers, stoats and domestic cats. Occasionally young animals will be taken by owls, buzzards, gulls or crows. Large numbers (up to 40%-60% of a colony) may succumb to an outbreak of myxomatosis.

SQUIRRELS

There are two species of squirrel in Northern Ireland, the red and the grey. The red squirrel is regarded as native to Ireland but may have become extinct here by the early 18th Century. It was re-introduced in the 19th Century and now is found throughout the Province. The grey squirrel was introduced from North America in 1913 and is now spreading throughout Northern Ireland, displacing the red squirrel in many areas.

Red squirrels are brown or chestnut red colour and have tufted ears in autumn and winter. Greys are larger in size and their upper fur is mostly grey with some brown areas on the sides and limbs. Red squirrels prefer coniferous woods while greys favour deciduous woods including hedges, parks and gardens.

Squirrels build nests called dreys high in trees in which they sleep or rear young. They are active during the day except when they wait out bad weather in the shelter of their dreys. Their diet consists mainly of seeds, fruit, berries and fungi. When food is scarce buds and shoots, tree bark, caterpillars and lichen may be eaten. Surplus food is stored in caches which are found again by smell.

Most deaths are caused by starvation and cold weather although owls, hawks, stoats, foxes, cats and dogs will take squirrels and some may also die as a result of road accidents.