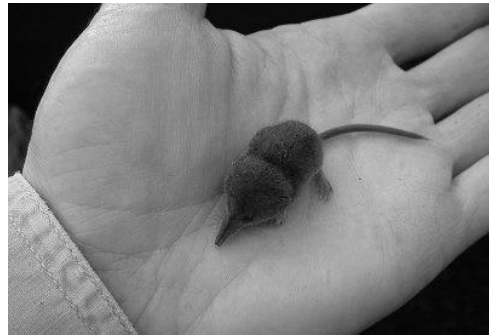


## More furry things in the loft

In February 2020 I wrote about an invasion of Wood Mice which we had in our loft. Immediately after that event, we caught 5 Bank Voles up there as well. With the onset of winter and the vigorous blocking up of holes and pruning of wall climbers and shrubs it all went quiet and we thought we'd won.

We installed an early warning device – a single peanut near the loft opening where it could be inspected from time to time. For many months the peanut remained untouched – wonderful! But then the peanut disappeared and there were worrying signs of droppings – so out with the humane trap. Zilch – food removed from the trap and no captive. We tried again with the backup of the camera trap to identify the suspect. We peered at the footage in puzzlement – the perpetrator was very tiny and seemed to have a long snout. It looked for all the world like a Pygmy Shrew but what on earth would one of those be doing in the loft? It was scampering with gay abandon in and out of the trap and over the supposedly sensitive trigger plate which was already primed with a 2p piece.

So we deployed a smaller more sensitive trap and this was more successful – well I suppose it was for us but not for the little creature – it was indeed a Pygmy Shrew and it was dead. Apparently they get very stressed in a trap even if you supply them with plenty of food and they just die, so much so that Longworth Traps which are used for catching small mammals for surveys often have small holes which shrews can get out of, otherwise they get too much shrew collateral damage.



So what is a Pygmy Shrew? Well it is not a rodent. Shrews are a completely different family, and they are insectivorous. They do not burrow like voles and rely on hunting above ground for prey items such as spiders and woodlice to supply their voracious appetite. They are active by day and night and are always hungry: they can eat 125% of their body weight every day and indeed they need to – they have a remarkably high metabolic rate and can't go without food for more than a couple of hours. They live for about a year and the females can have several litters during that time. They are indeed "pygmy" - their body is about 5 cms long, with a long pointy snout and quite a long tail and they only weigh 5 gms or so. As the name suggests they are smaller than Common Shrews and, like Common Shrews they are distasteful to many animals - cats often catch them and then discard them. Owls are not fussy however - they are a favourite snack..

Apparently shrews they do occasionally get into houses and I am hoping that our shrew, during its stay, significantly reduced the spider population in the loft. How it got in (and more to the point, why) we shall never know.

The peanut is now back in place.

*Rosemary Royle*