

Deer Mouse *Peromyscus maniculatus*

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Deer Mouse is one of several small rodent species found in Western North Carolina fields and forests. Small rodents are major food items for a variety of larger mammals, birds, and reptiles and are important in the seed dispersal of various forest plants on which they feed.

DESCRIPTION

The deer mouse ranges from around 6 to almost 8 inches in total length including the tail, which is about 1/2 of its total length. Adult deer mice are generally colored a tan or brown above with a white underbelly and throat while young deer mice are colored gray above with white underparts. The ears are large, rounded and mostly hairless and the eyes are also large and bulging. In overall appearance, the deer mouse at first glance looks almost identical to the White-footed mouse with which it may share the same general habitats. They can generally be told apart by looking at the tail. The tail of a deer mouse is bicolored, the top half being slightly darker than below.

HABITS AND HABITATS

Like other small rodents that are heavily preyed upon, the deer mouse is quite secretive. It is primarily active at night when it emerges from its nest to feed on many types of seeds, berries, acorns, fruits, and even insects and other small invertebrates. Deer mice usually make their nest in a cavity found inside a tree, stump, under logs and sometimes even in abandoned squirrel nests. They line their nest with an accumulation of moss, shredded tree bark, leaves, and other material. Their young can be born from early March on into November with as many as 4 litters a year and 2 to 7 young per litter. Young deer mice grow rapidly and are weaned by the age of 3 weeks and can breed at the age of 5 to 6 weeks. Deer mice rarely live more than a year or two in the wild. They can be found in a variety of forested habitats at various elevations of the southern Appalachian Mountains. Deer mice and other small forest rodents can be extremely numerous. With their reproductive potential, they could easily overpopulate their habitats, but this seldom occurs because of predation.

HISTORY

The deer mouse is the most widely distributed member of the *Peromyscus* group of mice and one of the most abundant of our small mammals. There are actually two distinct races of the deer mouse found in the southeastern states, distinguished primarily by their tail length. A long-tailed variety occurs throughout most of the southern Appalachian region but a rare, short tailed variety is found in localized areas to the north of the Carolinas in Virginia and Maryland. Although deer mice are primarily found in wooded areas, they will occasionally enter buildings, particularly during the winter. They even have been known to move into overwintering box hives kept for honeybees. They are seldom destructive, however, unlike the introduced European House Mouse which almost always lives inside buildings. Deer mice disperse the seeds of many wildflowers, trees and shrubs as they feed on various forest fruits. Due to their dispersing of seeds, being major food items for other animals, and their extreme abundance, the deer mouse is clearly an important and vital member of the forest community.

MEET OUR DEER MICE

The Nature Center maintains a small group of deer mice in the Nocturnal Hall exhibit. In Nocturnal Hall, we have reversed day and night cycles for a variety of small Appalachian animals. At night, timers turn on white lights that resemble daytime, causing these animals to become inactive. During our day, the timers turn on special red lighting which is undetected by the animals but allows us to view their nighttime activities during our daytime. Our deer mice are fed sunflower, and other various types of seeds, and pieces of fruits.

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