

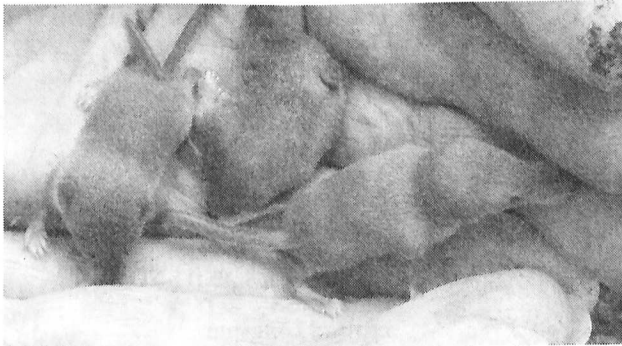
THE FRAMING OF THE SHREW: New Records for Water Shrew in Prince Edward Island

By Judi Allen, Garry Gregory, Mitchell MacMillan and Julie Vasseur

A swimming shrew, no less. A swimming shrew so adapted to watery environments that its fur traps air while it swims under water, not only reducing heat loss, but increasing buoyancy. As their name suggests, the water shrew (*Sorex palustris*) prefers habitats close to water, and with plenty of hiding spots – vegetation, logs, swampy tree roots, and rocks make survival that much easier.

Shrews look similar to mice and voles, but they are in fact very different – they are not even considered rodents! Shrews are insectivores and though they may branch out a bit to include plant matter and lichens, they typically stick to a diet of insects, augmented by a few small fish and tadpoles.

Water shrews are considered common in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick but extremely rare in Prince Edward Island – biologists don't yet have a great handle on the species' presence on PEI. Although it can be tricky to identify different species



Water shrew young at Whitlocks Pond on June 4, 2009

Photo by Garry Gregory



A dead water shrew found at West Point, PEI on Dec. 1, 2015. Its white beard shows up well.

Photo by Julie Vasseur

of shrews, the dark back and light belly of the water shrew is a sure giveaway, as are feet fringed with hairs, adapted for swimming. The tail is dark above and light below.

Water shrews were first reported for Prince Edward Island in 1980 in a paper written for the Canadian Field Naturalist, submitted by Howard Thomas, Gwilym Jones, and Randy Dibblee. Three specimens were reported: two (a male and a female) close to Sturgeon in Kings County PEI, and one (a male) at Whitlock's Pond in King's County. All three were located in watery habitats typical of the species. Not too long afterward, three males and a female were reported from the outlet of Long Pond in Prince

Edward Island National Park, the first records in Queens County. Thirty odd years later, 3 new PEI records have surfaced:

- On June 4, 2009, a litter of three well-furred brown water shrew pups at Whitlock's Pond was photographed by Garry Gregory, accompanied by Randy Dibblee. The nest was located on a push-up of mud along the margin of the pond where there was a break in the sweet gale.
- On April 20, 2014, a water shrew was seen swimming in a fresh water pond in Launching by Judi Allen and David McBurney. The pond was mainly ice-covered but a pipe (known as a beaver leveller) near the outlet created an area of open water. There were many of what seemed to be mouse tunnels along the top of the dam near the pipe, but several tunnels led directly to the water. As Dave and Judi were inspecting the tunnels, they suddenly noticed a tiny dark mammal swimming underwater surrounded by a sheen of air bubbles. The view was momentary, and then the water shrew disappeared under the overhanging bank. Swimming in icy cold water is typical behaviour for a water shrew, and its fur releases bubbles as it swims.
- On December 1, 2015, a dead water shrew was discovered in a swamp in West Point by Mitchell MacMillan, accompanied by Julie Vasseur. Red maple and alders were typical of the swamp - knee deep, non-flowing water except in areas "dry" enough for cinnamon ferns, alders and red maple to take root. These formed islands of semi-stable terrain between winding paths of water.

The shrew carcass was suspended on an alder branch and it had died of a traumatic injury to the face as evidenced by blood on the snout. How it got in an alder or what killed it remain unknowns. This is the first record of a water shrew in Prince County.

Even though water shrews are secretive and shy, hopefully in future more records of the species will be reported, so that we can better establish the status of the population in the province.

By the way, there is new evidence that water shrews in Eastern Canada are different from those in the rest of the country. It has been recommended based on genetic testing that our shrew be renamed *Sorex albibarbis*, the white-bearded water shrew.

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