



NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

A life in the fast lane

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We humans love to be awed by size. The blue whale, for instance. It's the largest animal that ever lived on the planet. Its heart — just its heart! — weighs more than half a ton.

At the other end of the scale, consider the North American least shrew. At birth, they weigh basically nothing — about as much as one pea. Full-grown, an adult is about three inches long and still weighs less than a nickel.

But these little guys are bundles of energy. Their hearts beat faster than a hummingbird's, up to 1,300 times a minute. They eat their own weight in insects every day. They have to capture food every 15 to 30 minutes around the clock, so they sleep just a few minutes at a time. If you had their metabolism, you'd have to eat 195 pounds of food a day.

With an appetite like that, least shrews (*Cryptotis parvus*) are good at keeping caterpillars, beetles, centipedes, slugs and sow bugs in check — a good thing in any garden. In commercial agriculture, they are important economically, destroying insects and slugs that harm crops. (Beekeepers are not fond of least shrews, however, since they can take up residence in a hive and eat all the larvae.) In their turn, least shrews are part of the food chain for larger predators like owls and hawks, though mammals shun them for their musky smell.

You may never have seen a least shrew. They were once common in our area, though, back when the Poconos had been clearcut in the 1800s and through the 1960s, until the woods grew back. Least shrews prefer grassy, shrubby, overgrown fields, and so today are rarely seen here.

Then again, you've probably never seen a blue whale, either. But isn't it grand to know our world is still big enough to contain creatures as wondrous as these?

For more information

Though local isolated groups of least shrews may exist, only three populations have been confirmed in York and Adams counties since 1990, when they were classified as endangered and protected in Pennsylvania. Learn more at:

<https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Wildlife/EndangeredandThreatened/Pages/LeastShrew.aspx#:~:text=In%20Pennsylvania%20the%20majority%20of,beneath%20its%20fine%2C%20velvety%20fur>



If you're lucky enough to see a least shrew, don't try to handle it — they have very sharp teeth, venomous saliva, and they give off a very stinky odor.
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