

SUPERB SMALL MAMMALS

House Mouse
Mus musculus

RATS, BATS, MICE, SHREWS!! Really is that what your husband studies?? UGH!!! and you go with him to the field?

As I nod yes, they roll their eyes and look at me with incredulity. The truth is, the world of these small mammals is so fascinating that I can't imagine how anyone could be scared of or dislike these creatures at all. In this article you will see this for yourself and I hope you too will come to see what superb animals they are.



In 1911-12 a mammal survey of India was carried out by the Bombay Natural History Society (under British rule). A Mr. Shortridge carried out extensive work in the Coorg region, a district of approximately 4000km² in Karnataka in the Western Ghats. Ninety-five years later, a survey of small mammals was carried out in the same region by Dr. Sanjay Molur. The survey revealed some rodents, interesting behaviours and showed us just what an important role they play in the circle of life. In this article I will show you four of our favourites.



Malabar Spiny-backed Tree Mouse *Platacanthomys lasiurus*

It took us almost three years before we finally found a Malabar Spiny-backed Tree Mouse *Platacanthomys lasiurus*. This animal is unfortunately listed as a pepper pest by the agricultural board of India – however, this is untrue – in all the interviews we took, of all the estate workers and owners, not one had ever seen this animal nor did they notice it near the pepper vines. This shy and reclusive creature is in fact listed as **Vulnerable** in the IUCN redlist. Found in very fragmented pockets in the Western Ghats it is losing its forests at an alarming rate. Being nocturnal there is not much study on its behavior, however, what we did notice was that in the daytime it just wanted to sleep and have nothing to do with the two nosy researchers who ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ at its every twitch of nose.



One of our favourite animals is this **Sahyadri Forest Rat *Rattus satarae***, he just decided that he would pose for the camera. Although he looks just like a common rat this beautiful creature is actually found in forest canopy, more importantly he loves to eat insects! He seemed to be completely unafraid of us. Unlike the common rat, these rodents when caught would not jump about frantically, but instead would stare up at us with this sort of bewildered look as if to ask .. “and you are..???” A **Vulnerable** species, this is endemic to the Western Ghats.



Sahyadri Forest Rat
Rattus satarae

Nilgiri Montane Shrew,
Suncus niger




The first time we caught a shrew – , we were at a loss. For one, it looked so different from the common Shrew. It was smaller, had an angular tail and was so much darker in colour. These are feisty creatures with really sharp teeth and neither Sanjay nor I wanted to run the risk of being bitten (the poor creature just wanted to be free). Like most mammals the easiest way to handle animals like cats, dogs, etc is to catch them by the scruff of their necks. That way they cannot harm you or themselves. We soon realized that we were dealing with two different species of Shrews – the Nilgiri Montane Shrew and the more common Grey Musk Shrew. These are great animals as they eat insects and are a farmer’s friend.

Grey Musk Shrew,
Suncus murinus



Pencil-tailed Tree Mouse *Uandeleuria nilagirica*



This was one of the cutest animals we caught. Tiny, dexterous, tree dwelling, fruit eating mice that built nests in the coffee bushes and banana plantations. They are nocturnal which means they are active at night. We kept a few for some months to observe their behavior. I would get up three or four times in the night and watch them for half an hour with a special light so as not to disturb them. They loved to eat watermelon and jackfruit as well as oranges!

What we learnt is that these animals are unfairly treated as pests. They are given the generic title of rodent and called vermin that cause damage to granaries and food stocks. There are around 110 species of rodents and shrews in India and about 30 species in the Western Ghats. All rats and mice (not shrews) are listed under Schedule V of the Wildlife Protection Act of India which means that they can be hunted and killed, however, only about 18 of the 110 are considered pests. If we study and understand these little creatures we just might be able to save them and have a healthy environment for us to live in too.

IUCN Red List is a list that scientists put together after a lot of research to understand what is happening to all the animals in the wild and whether they are threatened with extinction. After the analyses the scientists place them under different categories and these are:

Critically Endangeres: CR

Endangered: EN

Vulnerable: VU

Near Threatened: NT

Least Concern: LC

Data Deficient: DD

Not Evaluated: NE

To understand more about the IUCN Red List visit: www.iucnredlist.org

Text by Payal Molur
Photographs by Sanjay Molur