

BAYLANDS

Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse

The Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse is found only within the salt marshes of San Francisco Bay. In addition to the Palo Alto Baylands marshes, it is also found in the marshes of Corte Madera, San Pablo, San Leandro, Fremont, Alviso, and Redwood City.

The Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse is a small brown mouse, 2.9 to 4.6 inches (75 to 117 mm) long from head to tail. They only weigh about a third of an ounce (9 to 11 grams), about as much as three copper pennies. Their most distinctive marking is a patch of red or cinnamon colored fur on the belly. Consequently, it has also been called the "Red-bellied Harvest Mouse."

It is extremely difficult to view a Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse because they are mostly nocturnal and live within the marsh pickleweed and cordgrass. The mice are active between dusk and about an hour after sunrise, spending the majority of this time searching for food. During high tides the mice commonly climb atop plants and bushes to keep dry. They are capable of swimming but rarely chose to do so. During the highest tides of December and January, they are forced to relocate temporarily to the more elevated areas of the marshland. So either of these tide conditions gives one the best chance of actually seeing this tiny mouse.

Though small, the Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse has a large appetite. Its basic diet is green or dry marsh vegetation, but it eats sizable quantities of seeds when they are available. It is a true herbivore and does not eat insects as do many other mice species. It is also one of the few animals in the world that can sustain itself on brackish water alone, but it usually prefers to drink dew drops.

The highest reproductive activity of the females takes place between March and November. A simple nest is built on the ground in less than half a night. Each female will have from 1 to 4 litters a year, with

Nature Notes

3 to 4 babies in each. The mouse population fluctuates greatly on a seasonal basis. A peak occurs during the Spring and summer breeding periods. The population drops to a minimum in the Fall and winter months when the tides force the mice onto higher ground and more vulnerable positions.

The total number of Salt Marsh Harvest Mice remaining in the Palo Alto Baylands is unknown, but it is not a large population. They are eaten by a number of animals, including Short-eared Owls, Northern Harriers, American Kestrels, and even California Clapper Rails. They are listed as an endangered species, primarily because of the great loss of their marshland habitat in the Bay area over the last hundred years.

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