



# HARVEST MICE

This month our vet **Joe Inglis** tracks down the smallest rodent in Europe, the tiny harvest mouse.



## FAMILY FRIENDS

Harvest mice are closely related to other rodents, including the massive South American capybara. These super-sized rodents weigh over 60 kg, or the same as 15,000 of their harvest mouse cousins!

Weighing as little as 4 grams (about the same as a 20p piece) and only 5 or 6 cm long, the harvest mouse is just over half the size of a typical house mouse. These mini-mice are found across Europe and Asia, and usually live in fields of cereal crops, such as wheat or oats, or areas of long grass and hedgerows. Their fur is a rich orange colour on top, with a white tummy underneath. Their coats are brightest in the summer months, becoming darker in the winter.



Harvest mice are the only animals in Britain with special tails that can be used

like an extra limb to help them climb, allowing them to use their front feet for gathering food.

## GNAW-SOME GNASHERS

Their teeth keep growing throughout their lives as they get worn down by chewing hard food, such as seeds.

If you have a pet hamster, rat or mouse, don't worry that their teeth are yellow because all rodents, including harvest mice, have yellow enamel covering their teeth.



## MISSING MICE?

There is concern that harvest mice numbers are in decline, but counting such small and well-hidden animals is not easy, so it is hard to know for sure how endangered they are.

# 1.5 MILLION

Best estimates suggest this is the current population of harvest mice in the UK.

## BEST NESTS

Harvest mice make hollow nests about the size of tennis balls by weaving together strips of shredded grass. They are secured to grass stems, usually about 50 cm off the ground.



## UNFUSSY EATERS

Harvest mice are omnivorous (*say om ni vor us*) – able to survive on a varied diet depending on where they live and what food is available. Their favourite foods include seeds, fruit, grain and insects, such as flies, grasshoppers and even moths.

Tell me if you spot an owl ...

## STRANGER DANGER

With lots of predators to watch out for, harvest mice tend to be very cautious and always alert for signs of danger, such as birds of prey swooping down from the sky. In summer, they tend to be more active at night, but in winter they come out more in the daytime.

## BABY BOOMERS

Harvest mice produce a lot of babies! They can have their first litter of 3-8 pups (or pinkies, as they are also called) when they are just 45 days old. However, only around one in 100 mice survives beyond six months of age. Most of the rest either become dinner for predators, such as barn owls, cats, weasels, stoats, crows and hawks, or die from cold weather in the autumn and winter.