

THE LESSER (KNOWN) DWARF SHREW

C.D. Lynch

The Lesser dwarf shrew's (kleiner dwergskeerbek, *Suncus varilla*) colloquial name is derived from its size, for in dimension it is smaller than the Greater dwarf shrew, *Suncus lixus* and larger than the Least dwarf shrew, *Suncus infinitesimus*, although the prefix Lesser might just as well refer to the fact that it is one of the lesser known mammals. Only the abovementioned three dwarf shrews occur in South Africa, although other genera such as the forest shrews and musk shrews are also found.

The Lesser dwarf shrew has an average body length of 50 mm and a mass of 3,5g. The colour of the upper parts is greyish-chestnut and the under parts pale silvery-fawn. Apart from the fact that the Lesser dwarf shrew is known to occur singly or in pairs and constructs a round ball-shaped nest of grass approximately 100 mm in diameter in old disused termite mounds, very little else is known about its habits, habitat, food it eats, when it breeds and its distributional range. The Department of Mammalogy at the National Museum has consequently undertaken a research project with the objective of providing

information on these and possibly many more aspects of the Lesser dwarf shrew's natural history.



A fully-grown Lesser dwarf shrew dwarfed by a human hand.

Shrews which can easily be distinguished from rats and mice as they have long, narrow, pointed muzzles, very small eyes, five digits on each of the feet and narrow skulls with continuous rows of teeth, are classified as Insectivora. Evolutionary-speaking, Insectivora are a group of mammals regarded as having primitive characters and recognised as the most primitive of all placental (as opposed to pouch-bearing) mammals, and their ancestors probably gave rise to all other mammalian groups. The earliest known shrew-like Insectivora which were discovered in the fossil beds of Lesotho in 1966, indicate that they already existed some 190 million years ago (modern man has only been in existence some 20 000 years).

Of all the Insectivora, which include other species such as the hedgehogs, macroscelids and golden moles, shrews are the most numerous species in Africa. Shrews have musk glands which are situated on their flanks and are used to help the sexes find one another during the breeding season. Because shrews have a high metabolic rate they feed voraciously, eating one to two thirds (some say even as much as three times) their body mass of food per day. They will therefore soon die if deprived of food and water, even for short periods. Some American shrews have poisonous saliva of toxicity similar to that of the venom of cobras, and can inflict, although not lethal to man, poisonous bites. It is alleged that in proportion to its size the Hero shrew from central Africa has the strongest backbone of all mammals and can support a mass of 73 kg. The smallest mammal in the world is the pygmy shrew with a mass of as little as 2,1 g (= the mass of 4 paper clips). Shrews have a short life span and only live for about 16 months.



The round ball-shaped nest of the Lesser dwarf shrew.



A Lesser dwarf shrew mother caravaning with her young. Each young bites onto the body of the one in front of it.

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A Lesser dwarf shrew eating a small grasshopper.

NUWE MIERSPESIE ONTDEK

R.A. Earle

Die biologie van die Grondspieg, *Geocolaptes olivaceus* word tans in die Golden Gate Hoogland Nasionale Park deur die Departement Ornitologie van die Nasionale Museum bestudeer. Hierdie is een van die weinige voëlspesies wat uitsluitlik miere vreet. In 'n poging om vas te stel hoeveel en watter soorte miere beskikbaar is vir dié voëls om te vreet is daar soveel moontlik miere versamel en na dr. André Prins van die Suid-Afrikaanse Museum in Kaapstad vir identifikasie gestuur. Volgens dr. Prins, 'n kenner op die gebied van miere, was daar tussen die materiaal 'n nuwe spesie van die genus *Camponotus*.

Ontledings van die mis van die Grondspieg is nog nie gedoen nie en daar is tot op datum nog geen aanduiding of die voël van die nuwe mierspesie vreet nie. Interessant egter is dat 'n tweede nuwe mierspesie onlangs gevind is in die mis van Grondspegte in die suidwes Kaap naby Simonstad. Dit wil dus voorkom asof die huidige Grondspiegstudies baie meer inligting verskaf as wat enige persoon kon voorsien en beslis 'n groot bydrae maak tot die taksonomie van miere in Suid-Afrika.



Die Grondspieg, 'n voël wat uitsluitlik van miere leef.