

## Food of the House Shrew, *Suncus murinus sindensis* in the Indian Desert

POKARM *SUNCUS MURINUS SINDENSIS*

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The house shrew, *Suncus murinus sindensis* Anderson, 1877, is fairly common in crop as well as the grassland in the Indian desert. When we found the stomachs of this insectivore full of vegetation, the contents were analysed gravimetrically (Murton *et al.*, 1964) on the Semi-micro Mettler balance. The insectivorous were collected at Bisalpur (27°7'N—73°10'E), 10 kms north of the Jawai Dam in South-eastern desert of Rajasthan during the year 1978.

On a yearly basis (Table 1), their food was composed of various parts of vegetation (90.66 per cent) and insects constituted only 8.64 per cent of the diet. Seasonally, insects were consumed in slightly higher proportion during May, June and July, the summer months when the green vegetation is not available to them.

Bisalpur, situated on the slopes of Aravalli mountains, where the study was carried out, is relatively a wet zone receiving on an average a rainfall of 500 mm per annum, mostly from July to September. The study area is well vegetated and there is a relative abundance of insects. It is not easy to postulate why this insectivorous mammal preferred to survive on vegetation as compared to more nutritive insect diet.

As reported by Roberts (1977) the normal food of *Suncus murinus* (subspecies *tytleri* and *sindensis*) is, however insects particularly crickets (*Grillidae* spp.) and cockroaches (*Blattaria* spp.) in Pakistan. He also stated that there are records that this shrew inflicts damage on garden lawns by digging out and eating the bulbils of a grass in Pakistan. Balakrishnan (1977) in his laboratory studies has reported that the allied subspecies, *S. m. viridescens* preferred insects and also readily fed upon many other food items including fish, beef, molluscan meat, even rice and wheat flours. In the present study, the occurrence of vegetation all the year round is rather perplexing!

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Table 1  
 Monthly distribution of gut items of *Suncus murinus sindensis* (text see p. 133).

Food items	Jan. (10) <sup>1</sup>	Feb. (10)	Mar. (6)	Apr. (9)	May (7)	June (3)	July (5)	Aug. (10)	Sept. (14)	Oct. (23)	Nov. (5)	Dec. (14)	Annual percent occurrence
Unident. vegetation	91.5	75.7	—	85.5	60.3	60.9	63.3	92.6	97.7	72.9	91.3	96.4	88.6
Leaf blades	—	—	67.7	1.7	3.2	—	4.2	—	0.6	2.1	—	1.2	1.7
Seeds of cucurbit	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.4	0.0
Rhizomes of grasses	—	8.8	—	0.2	3.9	—	0.5	—	—	4.2	—	—	0.3
Total vegetation	91.5	83.5	67.7	87.4	67.4	60.9	67.9	92.6	98.4	79.2	91.3	98.0	90.7
Fur	1.9	—	19.2	6.0	—	—	7.0	—	—	6.2	0.3	0.4	0.7
Insect parts <sup>2</sup>	6.6	15.5	13.1	6.7	32.6	39.1	25.1	7.4	1.6	14.6	8.5	1.6	8.6

<sup>1</sup> The total number of shrews captured and examined, <sup>2</sup> Legs, antennae, terga sterna etc. of orders *Coleoptera*, *Hymenoptera*, *Orthoptera* (*Gryllidae*) and *Hemiptera*.