

The Florida Mouse is the only mouse endemic to Florida
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The term Florida Mouse in the state of Florida, may conjure up visions of Mickey Mouse and other creatures from a nearby fantasy world. And while the Sunshine State may be known partially for that particular mouse, there is another critter that is the real deal. The true, factual Florida mouse is a species of rodent in the Cricetidae family. The Latin name for the creature is *Podomys floridanus*. The amazing thing about this mouse is that it is the only one endemic to Florida. It is found only in limited areas and certainly doesn't live in a make believe world where everything is magical, but inhabits some of the hottest, driest and highest areas in our state.

Like many other species, this mouse relies on other critters to provide its home and nesting area. In fact, the Florida mouse is sometimes called the gopher mouse because it finds its abode within the long, deep burrow of the gopher tortoise. The mouse will scurry into the dark tunnel and make nest chambers out of small side passages. Because predators of the mouse may also reside within the burrow, the critter makes small openings in the roof of the burrow to use as an exit for a quick get a way if needed.

The mouse grows to about 7 ½ inches in length and has large ears without fur and a short tail. It has brown-orange upperparts and is white underneath. When young, the mice are gray in color. They don't smell very good and have been said to have a skunk-like odor. Florida mice can be distinguished from other mice by the 5 pads on each of their hind feet. Other mice have 6 or 7 pads, which are called plantar tubercles.

Like other mice, the Florida Mouse is an omnivore, eating seeds, plants, some insects, nuts and fungi. Acorns are their favorite food. They are ground dwellers and do not generally dig their own holes. If the rodent can't find a convenient gopher tortoise hole, they are not picky and will utilize burrows of the armadillo, other mice, cotton rats and even in pocket gopher mounds. They are nocturnal and generally hunt at night. Predators include spotted skunks, bobcats, birds of prey, raccoons and various snakes such as indigo and pine snakes.

Florida mice breed all year long but mostly between July and December. Gestation usually lasts about 24 days. When she is ready to have her young, the female will line a side pocket of the burrow she is living in with shredded plant material to use for her nest. Average litter size is 3 babies which weigh about .10 ounces and measure about 1 ½ inches. The young develop teeth by the fourth day and become active around day 10, although their eyes do not open until they are about 2 weeks old. The mother nurses her young constantly for the first 2 weeks. After only about 3 to 4 weeks the young are weaned and begin to display adult behavior. Their life expectancy is about 1 year.

The unique thing about the Florida mouse is that it is the only *Podomys* mouse that is endemic to Florida. It can be found coast to coast in central peninsular Florida. There is a population of these mice in the panhandle at Franklin County. The mouse can be found from north-central Florida south to Highlands County and Sarasota County. It is found on the Atlantic coast from St. Johns County south to Miami-Dade County.

This creature resides in some of the state's driest locations such as scrubby areas. It has been found in sand pine scrub, high pinelands of turkey oak and longleaf pine, slash pine flatwoods, southern ridge sandhills, scrubby flatlands and coastal scrub. Florida mice require about 1 acre for their territory. The largest populations of Florida mice are found in the Ocala National Forest and the Lake Wales Ridge.

The species has been deemed Threatened by the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals and has been named a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. The reason this tiny creature is in peril is because of habitat loss. Development and agriculture have taken much of the rodents' limited habitat. Fire suppression is another major problem for the mouse. Without fire to keep its habitat healthy, continual habitat decline is expected. Another major problem for the mouse is gopher tortoise population decline. As stated above, the mouse depends on this creature for its home and gopher tortoises are disappearing because of disease and habitat loss.

Fortunately the Florida mouse is protected in some areas such as Archbold Biological Station and the Ocala National Forest. Hopefully, scientists will be able to study and learn more about this shy creature and find ways to help it survive.