



Chris Mouse

Christmas mouse stories are very common, it seems.

Among my favorite Christmas stories is *The Christmas Mouse*, by Elisabeth Wenning, written in 1959. It was about the adventures of the Austrian church mouse that ate parts of the church organ's bellow, which ultimately led the resident priest to write "Silent Night." We used to read it around Christmastime when I was young. It seems that Christmas mouse stories are very common, and not finding any theories to explain this curious fact on that all-knowing source, the internet,

I've taken the liberty of coming up with my own.

When the weather turns cold, typically around the holidays, mice seek out warm places, which often turn out to be our houses. And with all the sweets that are left on counters, likely many folks discover a mouse sharing their quarters. Mice aren't your breakfast, lunch, and dinner creatures, either; in fact they eat upwards of 20 meals (up to 30 percent of their body weight) in a single day. I tried that on a cruise ship, once, and it wasn't easy.

Mice are also very good at leaving their calling cards scattered about in the form of 40 to 100 droppings a day. Being rodents, they need to gnaw constantly to keep their ever-growing incisors in check. In fact, one may be rewiring your house as you read this article, since wiring insulation is apparently a bit of a delicacy in the mouse community.

NJ's resident species is the white-footed mouse, *Peromyscus leucopus*. They generally live in field, shrub, and woodland habitat. As omnivores, they eat nuts, seeds, fruit, beetles, caterpillars, and, if food is in short

supply, even one another. Black cherry pits and jewelweed seeds are favorites (J. Whitaker). My husband contends their favorite food combo is chocolate and peanut butter. Based on his trapping success, who am I to argue?

Just as important as what they eat is who eats them. They are essential to the food web, and birds of prey, especially owls, as well as snakes, foxes, weasels, bass, and a host of other species feast on them. A mouse can produce up to 40 babies in a year, beginning at 44 days of age; they can live up to two years but because of heavy predation most perish sooner.

Mice are primarily nocturnal. They sleep as much as 14 hours a day. The cover of night helps to conceal them from predators. Their bulging eyes are placed on the sides of their heads, like most prey species, to detect attackers. Their body is about six inches with a matching length tail. I'd venture your ears would have to be five or six inches to be proportionate to this tiny rodent's ears. They have massive ears to amplify any sounds of approaching danger. Furthermore they communicate with each other at frequencies lower than can be heard by humans. They

also communicate with facial expressions and scent trails.

Mice establish routes and run along walls, probably because aerial predators find it very difficult to swoop in against such a barrier. I have also seen quail elude red tail hawks by hugging the perimeter of structures.

As newlyweds, we once had a mouse in the house. I decided to capture it humanely and release it outside. My father in-law told me that the same mouse was surely returning. So I decided to mark the next catch with red nail polish. It wasn't especially cooperative with my artistic efforts and I ended up marking it with a Z like Zorro's slash. Sure enough, a few weeks later a mouse showed up with fur missing in the shape of a Z.

Older and wiser, and many destroyed items later, I now use mechanical traps to catch the critters. Poisons always run the risk of unintended consequences, either killing other prey species like owls or leaving mice to die in walls where you suffer their fragrance for weeks to come. Using the sticky traps prolongs death and allows for unwanted urination and defecation. And frankly,

although you may dispute me, many cats are not great at catching mice.

When trapping mice you may need to get imaginative. Their IQs are said to be as high as rats', which apparently are quite smart. The best plan is to search out openings in your home and plug them. Pest experts recommend steel wool or expanding foam, and keep in mind that they can get in a quarter-inch opening.

When it comes to a great mix of mouse intelligence and holiday cinema, by far my all time favorite is *Mousehunt*, from 1997. Two debatably mature brothers, the Smuntzes, seek to restore the family home to its former glory in order to resell it to make a fortune. Only one little creature stands in the way of their plans. Nathan Lane and Lee Evans play the hapless fraternal duo who try all manner of schemes to rid the house of the little nuisance.

Consider my recommendation as your holiday gift: Merry Chris Mouse!

Postscript: 2018 marked the 200th year since the hymn *Silent Night* was written