

## Dark kangaroo mouse | *Microdipodops megacephalus*

The dark kangaroo mouse is restricted to the Great Basin Desert. Its distribution is centered in Nevada, with populations extending into the adjoining states of California, Oregon, and Utah. Like the pale kangaroo mouse, *Microdipodops pallidus*, it inhabits stabilized dunes and other sandy soils; where the two overlap, the dark kangaroo mouse occurs on fine gravelly soils. Its preferred habitat, characterized as Upper Sonoran life zone,

is primarily valley bottoms and alluvial fans dominated by big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus*), and horsebrush (*Tetradymia*).

Although the bodies of kangaroo mice appear identical to those of kangaroo rats, the tail differs in being shorter and in lacking a well-developed crest of hair at the tip. Both kangaroo mice, *Microdipodops megacephalus* and *M. pallidus*, have a fat de-



*Microdipodops megacephalus*

posit in the middle of the tail, which is unique in North American small mammals and is similar to fat deposits in the tails of small desert mammals in Africa and Australia. This fat deposit increases in size from spring to fall, reaching its greatest size prior to the animal's entry into hibernation. Individuals with the largest fat deposit tend to survive to the following year, suggesting an overall better body condition.

The dark kangaroo mouse usually emerges from hibernation in March and reenters hibernation by November. Aboveground activity is greatest during the first two hours after sunset, with only periodic forays the remainder of the night. Like other bipedal rodents, *M. megacephalus* forages in the open where shrub canopy cover is sparse. Consequently, moonlight inhibits aboveground activity. Although primarily granivorous, the dark kangaroo mouse eats a wide variety of insects. When feeding on seeds, it seeks out clumps of seeds instead of harvesting individual seeds. As with other heteromyid species,

these animals do not drink water. They conserve water by restricting their activity to night, when it is cooler, and by producing concentrated urine and dry feces; they gain water from foodstuffs.

The dark kangaroo mouse can be aggressive to others of its species. However, it appears that other, co-existing species are behaviorally dominant. This includes the little pocket mouse, which is only half the size of a kangaroo mouse. Kangaroo mice readily enter live traps baited with seeds from March through April, but after that, when little pocket mice emerge from hibernation, kangaroo mice are rarely captured. When little pocket mice reenter hibernation at the end of August, kangaroo mice again enter traps and are commonly encountered through the autumn.

Pregnant individuals have been found from April through September. Litter size varies from two to seven, with a mean of 3.9. It is probable that multiple litters are produced, particularly in favorable years. Dark kangaroo mice have been kept in captivity for up to 5.5 years.

*Microdipodops megacephalus* lives in highly diverse small mammal communities. Common coexisting rodents include Merriam's, Ord's, and Panamint kangaroo rats, and little pocket mice, deer mice, western harvest mice, and grasshopper mice. *M. J. O'Farrell*

**Size**

No significant sexual dimorphism

Total length: 138–177 (160) mm

Length of tail: 67–103 (86) mm

Weight: 10.0–16.9 (13.1) g

**Identification**

This kangaroo mouse is distinguished by brownish, blackish, or grayish dorsal pelage.