



WILDLIFE NOTES

Grasshopper mouse

Onychomys leucogaster

Emerging from its den, a predator lifts its muzzle to the sky and fills the dusk with a blood-chilling howl. Sniffing the night air and sneaking quietly through vegetation, it searches for prey and soon finds an unwary herbivore munching on a grass stem. A careful stalk, a headlong rush, and the herbivore hangs lifeless from the hunter's jaw. Soon all that remain of the prey are a few legs and small drops of blood.

Sound pretty ferocious? It is, yet the predator is found all over New Mexico. A common animal, it lives both in isolated areas and in close proximity to humans. It can even be found in back yards. Ferocious this predator may be, but there's no need to get alarmed about the family dogs, cats, or children being eaten because this animal is the grasshopper mouse and is only four to six inches long.

While most mice are herbivores, eating seeds and plant matter, grasshopper mice are carnivorous. They mostly eat insects but will tackle larger prey, including other mice species and lizards. Grasshopper mice are well-equipped for a predatory life-style with their long, sharp incisors. One man kept a grasshopper mouse captive for several weeks in a large terrarium and made the mistake of putting a huge laboratory rat in with him for "just a few m min-

utes" while he cleaned the rat's housing. When he returned, the grasshopper mouse had killed the rat, which was about five times his size, and was feeding on the carcass.

Topping that off is the grasshopper mouse's habit of howling before hunting, although the call might be better described as a squeal, given the mouse's diminutive size. The man's captive mouse howled routinely at dusk and whenever the man dropped an insect or house mouse into the grasshopper mouse's enclosure. This howl serves much the same purpose as for a wolf; it's a territorial marker, the mouse's way of saying to other mice, "Here I am."

There are two species of grasshopper mice in New Mexico. Both are stocky mice with short, fat tails. Their faces are more pointed than those of other mice. Their ears are quite round and not particularly large. The northern grasshopper mouse has the scientific name *Onychomys leucogaster* (the genus is pronounced O-NICK-meas), and the southern grasshopper mouse is *O. torridus*. The northern mouse is larger, weighing about two ounces, while the southern mouse weighs about 1.5 ounces. The northern mouse is five to six inches long, tail included, and the southern is about four inches long. Both species have two color phases, gray or pink-cinnamon. All have white bellies and



white feet.

Their fur is short and soft, not coarse like that of many of many other mice. The overall effect creates a rather handsome mouse.

Another characteristic of grasshopper mice is their gait. They don't hop and jump like other mice; they run like larger mammals. Their gait is a bit like a badger's.

Grasshopper mice live in burrows dug by other animals. Their predatory habits make them basically solitary animals. As do other mice, they breed quickly and frequently, producing two or three litters of young per year, bearing three to five babies each time. Their gestation period is considerably longer than many other mice, though. White-footed mice, for instance, have a gestation period of about 24 days, while the

grasshopper mouse's is 35 to 45 days.

In New Mexico, the grasshopper mouse is a desert or prairie resident. Southern grasshopper mice occur in the southern half of the state up to a line drawn from Gallup to Albuquerque to Roswell, while the northern version occurs statewide and continues on up into Canada. The southern mouse's range extends into southern Arizona, Nevada and California. The two species overlap only in southern New Mexico, southern Arizona and west Texas.

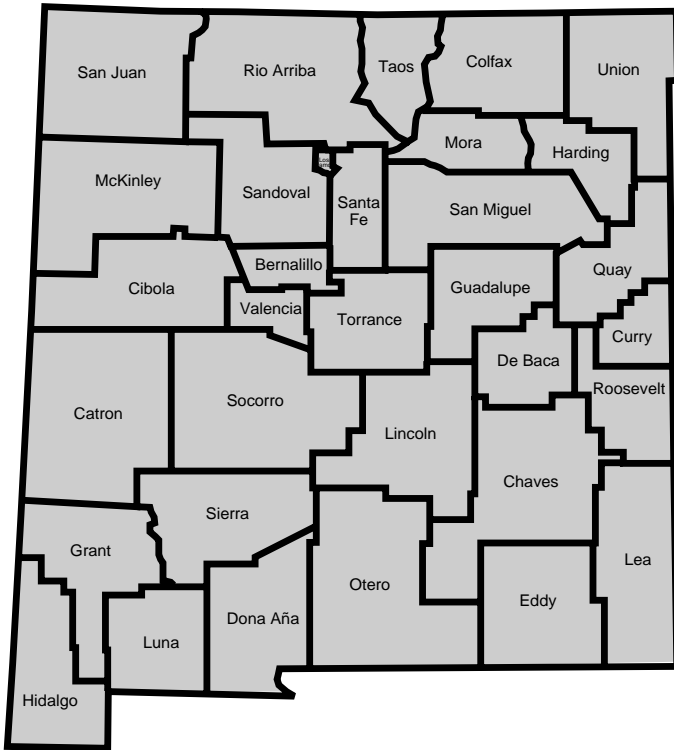
They are fairly common rodents though they are

not commonly seen or captured. One way biologists study small mammal populations is by trapping them, using peanut butter and oats as bait. Because grasshopper mice are predatory, they are neither attracted to this bait nor often caught. When they are trapped, perhaps it's because they were attracted to insects in the traps or to the smell of previously caught rodents.

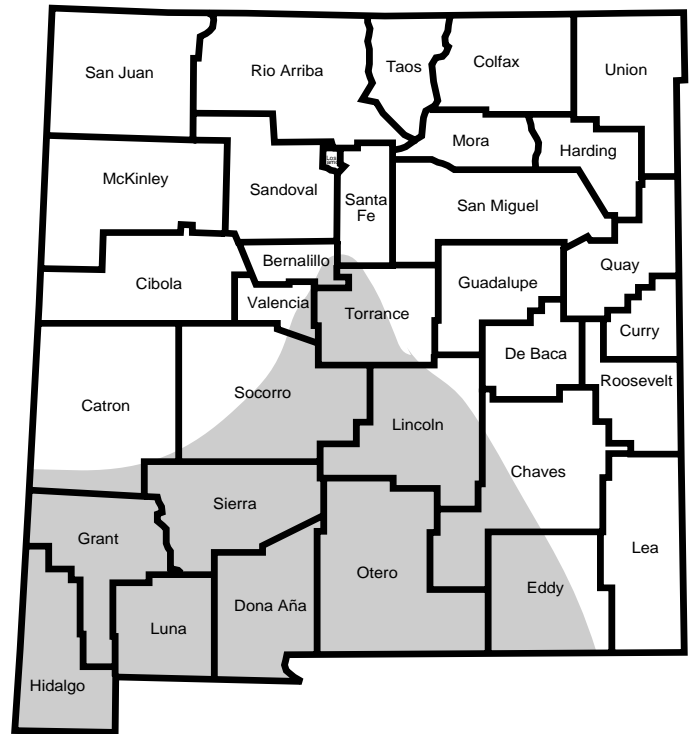
It's hard to find characteristics to dislike about grasshopper mice. They're handsome, unique predators, and they don't cause anyone any problems.

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Onychomys leucogaster range



Onychomys torridus range



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