

# An Illustrated Key to the Mandibles of Small Mammals of Eastern Canada

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Skulls are often used to identify small mammals, and most identification keys to small mammals have been developed on the assumption that whole skulls will be available. However, the skulls of small mammals are seldom found intact in predator pellets or nests, and the bones of several individuals are often scattered and mixed, making counting impossible without the use of a specific cranial part. In addition, only a few keys include all the species found in the eastern provinces of Canada.

Mandibles readily resist degradation by the gastric acids of both avian and mammalian predators and are often found intact in food caches of mustelids and in bat hibernacula. We therefore designed an illustrated dichotomous key to small mammals (mean mass <5 kg) of eastern Canada based on diagnostic mandible characters (including the teeth and one dentary bone). We identified and confirmed diagnostic characters to distinguish 55 species from the orders Lagomorpha, Rodentia, Soricomorpha, Carnivora, and Chiroptera. These diagnostic characters are based on a review of the literature and were confirmed by measurements performed on both museum and trapped specimens. In order to facilitate identification, photographic illustrations are provided for each couplet of the key.

The ability to identify small mammals using their mandibles will reduce the number of skull components needed and has proven to be a useful tool in the study of the diet of predators. This key may also be helpful in identifying bats in the genera *Myotis*, *Perimyotis*, and *Eptesicus*, which are presently affected by the spread of white-nose syndrome (caused by *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*) throughout the eastern part of Canada.

Key Words: Lagomorpha; Rodentia; Soricomorpha; Carnivora; Chiroptera; shrews; moles; voles; lemmings; mice; bats; hares; weasels; lower jaw; skull; dentary; eastern Canada

## Introduction

Small mammals consumed by predators are particularly difficult to identify because their skulls are often physically damaged or they have been degraded by gastric acids (Mayhew 1977). Cranial bones that resist degradation often disassociate from the larger component they were affixed to and are often found scattered in predator scats, pellets, or nests (Buidin *et al.* 2007; Khalafalla and Iudica 2010). They may also be found as concentrations of loose bones near caves or other shelters used by predators (Buden 1974). Predators such as mustelids have “food caches” in which they store carcasses for later consumption (Oksanen *et al.* 1985). As a result, prey remains may be disassociated and may accumulate.

Several published keys to small mammal skulls are based on the assumption that the whole skull is available (van Zyll de Jong 1983; Glass and Thies 1997; Lupien 2001, 2002; Nagorsen 2002; Chapman *et al.* 2007), but this is rarely the case with prey remains (Mollhagen *et al.* 1972; Buden 1974; Balciauskiene *et*

*al.* 2002). Furthermore, loose bones of different individual prey items are often mixed. The minimum number of individuals is a derived unit of abundance often used in paleozoology (Lyman 2008). By using a single skull component, this method avoids overestimating species abundance in bone aggregations. The mandible has been proposed as a useful cranial component for identifying groups of mammals (Roest 1991; Balciauskiene *et al.* 2002), but it has rarely been used to identify mammals to the species level, except for shrews (Repenning 1967; Carraway 1995).

The mandible, or lower jaw, is composed of teeth and a pair of dentary bones (Figure 1). The teeth of the mandible are often referred to as the lower dentition, and each tooth is identified with a lower case letter (i.e., p3 for the third premolar). For the present article, we focused on the mandible and thus omitted the term “lower”. Because the left and right dentary often separate as a result of degradation, it is imperative that the same dentary bone (i.e., left or right, but not both) be used for counting purposes.

Several diagnostic characters make the mandible an ideal tool for identifying most mammalian species that have very few but sturdy bones. The size, the dental formulae, and the occlusal patterns of the molar enamel are key characteristics that are often used in keys to skulls (Repenning 1967; Glass and Thies 1997; Lupien 2002; Nagorsen 2002). Furthermore, diagnostic characters of the dentary bones are found on both the anterior and the posterior parts. The size and shape of the lower edge of the ramus and the position of the mental and dental foramina, as well as the size and shape of the condylar, coronoid, and angular processes, are useful characters requiring only a few metric measurements (Roest 1991; Carraway 1995).

We present an identification key to the mandibles of all established small mammals (mean mass of <5 kg) of eastern Canada to assist in the identification of prey remains and other types of loose bones when skulls are incomplete or damaged. Each criterion mentioned in the couplets of the key is illustrated by a picture as a visual support. A glossary and the general nomenclature are also provided.

## Methods

According to Merritt (2010), mammals may be categorized as small when the average mass of the species is less than 5 kg. Based on this criterion, we selected all the small mammals established in the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia (Peterson 1966; Banfield 1974; Dobbyn 1994; Desrosiers *et al.* 2002; Naughton 2012). The general taxonomy used in the key is listed in Table 1.

This key summarizes all diagnostic mandible characters that we have found in the literature for the orders Lagomorpha (Roest 1991), Rodentia (Klingener 1963; Phillips and Oxberry 1972; Grayson *et al.* 1990; Roest 1991; Lupien 2002; Chapman *et al.* 2007), Soricomorpha (Hallet 1978; Yates and Schmidly 1978; van Zyll de Jong 1983; Carraway 1995; Glass and Thies 1997; Lupien 2001), Carnivora (Roest 1991; Glass and Thies 1997), and Chiroptera (Gaudin *et al.* 2011). Cer-

tain species were very difficult to distinguish using the morphologic features of the mandible alone. Therefore, we included morphometric measurements such as the length of the mandible, the length of the mandibular tooth row, and the height of the coronoid process when two species or groups of species could be distinguished only by size.

We validated the mandible characteristics presented in this key by studying specimens from Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia preserved in the Canadian Museum of Nature and Université Laval. Morphometric measurements were validated on 10 specimens of each species when possible. Otherwise, all specimens available were used. We further extracted a sample of reference mandibles from complete frozen specimens, in collaboration with the Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement, de la Faune et des Parcs du Québec and the Université du Québec à Rimouski, and from specimens trapped during a related study (Fauteux *et al.* 2012). The relevance of the diagnostic characters in identifying prey remains was validated by Ségué (2010) using nest remains to quantify the diet of Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*).

## Results and Discussion

We found that 55 of the 60 small mammal species of eastern Canada could be identified from their mandibles. The White-footed Mouse (*Peromyscus leucopus*) and the Deer Mouse (*P. maniculatus*) could not be identified to the species level, because their mandibles are identical. Although both *Peromyscus* species may be differentiated using several skull measurements, biochemical and genetic markers are probably the only reliable methods to date (Aquadro and Patton 1980; Rich *et al.* 1996). Similarly, three species of lagomorphs (i.e., *Lepus arcticus*, *L. europaeus*, and *L. townsendii*) could not be distinguished using the mandibles alone.

Consulting species' distribution may facilitate identification of small mammals (Banfield 1974; Desrosiers *et al.* 2002; Naughton 2012). For example, *Sciurus*

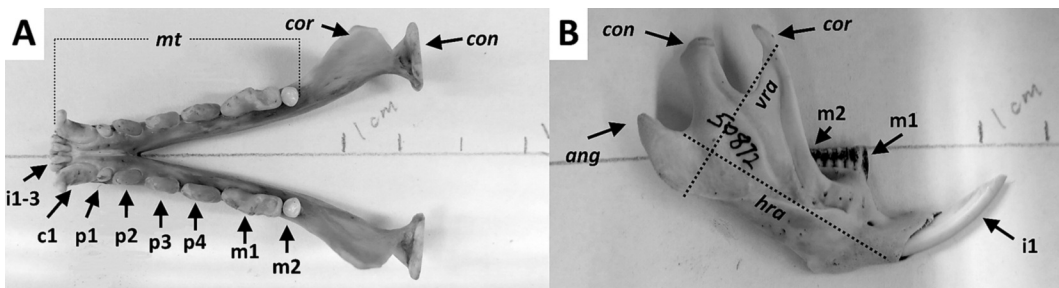


FIGURE 1. (A. Labial view; B. Occlusal view) The mandibles of carnivores (*Martes americana*) (A) and rodents (*Ondatra zibethicus*) (B). Labels refer to the incisor (i), canine (c), premolar (p), molar (m), mandibular tooth row (mt), coronoid process (cor), condyle (con), angular process (ang), vertical ramus (vra), and horizontal ramus (hra).

TABLE 1. Common and scientific names of the small mammals <5 kg in eastern Canada identified in the dichotomous key (Peterson 1966; Banfield 1974; Wilson and Reeder 2005; Hooper *et al.* 2006; Naughton 2012; ITIS 2013).

Order	Family	Scientific name	Common name (English)	Nom commun (français)
Rodentia	Cricetidae	<i>Dicrostonyx hudsonius</i>	Ungava Collared Lemming	Lemming d'Ungava
		<i>Microtus chrotorrhinus</i>	Rock Vole	Campagnol des rochers
		<i>Microtus pennsylvanicus</i>	Meadow Vole	Campagnol des champs
		<i>Microtus pinetorum</i>	Woodland Vole	Campagnol sylvestre
		<i>Myodes gapperi</i>	Southern red-backed Vole	Campagnol à dos roux de Gapper
		<i>Myodes glareolus</i>	Bank Vole	Campagnol roussâtre
		<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>	Common Muskrat	Rat-musqué commun
		<i>Peromyscus leucopus</i>	White-footed Mouse	Souris à pattes blanches
		<i>Peromyscus maniculatus</i>	Deer Mouse	Souris sylvestre
		<i>Phenacomys ungava</i>	Eastern Heather Vole	Phénaomys
		<i>Synaptomys borealis</i>	Northern Bog Lemming	Lemming des tourbières
		<i>Synaptomys cooperi</i>	Southern Bog Lemming	Lemming de Cooper
		<i>Napaeozapus insignis</i>	Woodland Jumping Mouse	Zapode des bois
		<i>Zapus hudsonius</i>	Meadow Jumping Mouse	Zapode des champs
Erethizontidae	Muridae	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>	North American Porcupine	Porc-épic d'Amérique
		<i>Mus musculus</i>	Common Mouse	Souris commune
		<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	Norway Rat	Rat surmulot
		<i>Glaucomys sabrinus</i>	Northern Flying Squirrel	Grand polatouche
		<i>Glaucomys volans</i>	Southern Flying Squirrel	Petit polatouche
		<i>Marmota monax</i>	Woodchuck	Marmotte commune
		<i>Poliocitellus franklinii</i>	Franklin's Ground Squirrel	Spermophile de Franklin
		<i>Tamias minimus</i>	Least Chipmunk	Tamia mineur
		<i>Tamias striatus</i>	Eastern Chipmunk	Tamia rayé
		<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	Red Squirrel	Écureuil roux
Leporidae	Leporidae	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	Eastern Gray Squirrel	Écureuil gris
		<i>Sciurus niger</i>	Eastern Fox Squirrel	Écureuil fauve
		<i>Lepus americanus</i>	Snowshoe Hare	Lièvre d'Amérique
		<i>Lepus arcticus</i>	Arctic Hare	Lièvre arctique
		<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	European Hare	Lièvre d'Europe
		<i>Lepus townsendii</i>	White-tailed Jackrabbit	Lièvre de Townsend
		<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	Eastern Cottontail	Lapin à queue blanche
		<i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	Grey Fox	Renard gris
		<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Arctic Fox	Renard arctique
		<i>Mephitis mephitis</i>	Red Fox	Renard roux
Mephitidae	Mustelidae	<i>Martes americana</i>	Striped Skunk	Moufette rayée
		<i>Martes pennanti</i>	American Marten	Martre d'Amérique
		<i>Mustela erminea</i>	Fisher	Pékan
		<i>Mustela frenata</i>	Ermine	Hermine
		<i>Mustela nivalis</i>	Long-tailed Weasel	Belette à longue queue
Carnivora	Canidae		Least Weasel	Belette pygmée

TABLE 1. (*continued*) Common and scientific names of the small mammals <5 kg in eastern Canada identified in the dichotomous key (Peterson 1966; Banfield 1974; Wilson and Reeder 2005; Hooper *et al.* 2006; Naughton 2012; ITIS 2013).

Order	Family	Scientific name	Common name (English)	Nom commun (français)
Soricomorpha	Soricidae	<i>Neovison vison</i>	American Mink	Vison d'Amérique
		<i>Blarina brevicauda</i>	Northern Short-tailed Shrew	Grande musaraigne
		<i>Sorex arcticus</i>	Arctic Shrew	Musaraigne arctique
		<i>Sorex cinereus</i>	Cinereous Shrew	Musaraigne cendrée
		<i>Sorex dispar</i>	Long-tailed Shrew	Musaraigne longicaude
		<i>Sorex fumeus</i>	Smoky Shrew	Musaraigne fuligineuse
		<i>Sorex hoyi</i>	North American Pygmy Shrew	Musaraigne pygmée
		<i>Sorex maritimensis</i>	Maritime Shrew	Musaraigne des Maritimes
		<i>Sorex palustris</i>	North American Water Shrew	Musaraigne palustre
		<i>Condylura cristata</i>	Star-nosed Mole	Condylure à nez étoilé
		<i>Parascalops breweri</i>	Hairy-tailed Mole	Taube à queue velue
		Chiroptera	Vespertilionidae	<i>Scalopus aquaticus</i>
<i>Eptesicus fuscus</i>	Big Brown Bat			Grande chauve-souris brune
<i>Lasionycteris noctivagans</i>	Silver-haired Bat			Chauve-souris argentée
<i>Lasiurus borealis</i>	Eastern Red Bat			Chauve-souris rousse
<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>	Hoary Bat			Chauve-souris cendrée
<i>Myotis leibii</i>	Eastern Small-footed Myotis			Chauve-souris pygmée
<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	Little Brown Myotis			Petite chauve-souris brune
<i>Myotis septentrionalis</i>	Northern Myotis			Chauve-souris nordique
<i>Perimyotis subflavus</i>	Tri-colored Bat			Pipistrelle de l'Est

*niger* are found only in extreme southern Ontario, and the distribution of *Sorex maritimensis* is restricted to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

The mandible is highly polymorphic between and within orders. The order Soricomorpha can be distinguished from other orders because the canine is similar in size to the premolars and the angular process is long and slender (Figure 2B) (key section D). In Lagomorpha, the large angular process and the very small coronoid process are probably the most distinctive characters (Figure 3A) (key section B). In contrast, species of the order Rodentia have a well-developed coronoid process, often with complex occlusal patterns on the molars (Figures 3B) (key section C). Carnivores have large canines and a coronoid process that is disproportionately larger than the condyle and the angular process (Figure 4B) (key section E). Species from the order

Chiroptera are mainly characterized by the relatively small vertical ramus and the conspicuous bump on the lower edge of the horizontal ramus beneath the canine (Figure 5B) (key section F).

In some cases, mandibles may be broken and/or teeth may be missing. To address this problem, we provide two or more criteria. However, we struggled to find more than one mandibular characteristic in certain groups of species. In the orders Lagomorpha and Carnivora, only the length of the mandibular tooth row and the height of the coronoid process may be used effectively to distinguish the hares (*Lepus* spp.) and the weasels (*Mustela* spp.). Voles and lemmings may be more effectively differentiated with dental criteria, and identifications may become difficult when the teeth are missing (Banfield 1974; Lupien 2002). Although identifications using heavily degraded mandibles (e.g.,

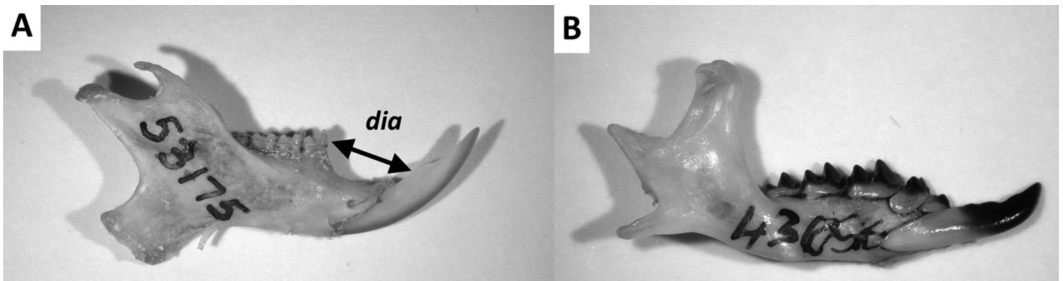


FIGURE 2. (labial view) Dentary bone of rodents with a large diastema (*dia*) (*Glaucomys volans*) (A), and soricomorphs (*Blarina brevicauda*) (B).

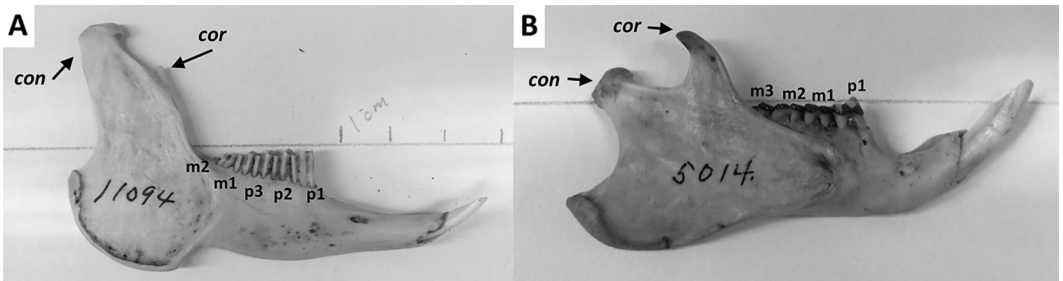


FIGURE 3. (labial view) Coronoid process (*cor*) and condyle (*con*) of lagomorphs (*Lepus arcticus*) (A) and rodents (*Marmota monax*) (B).

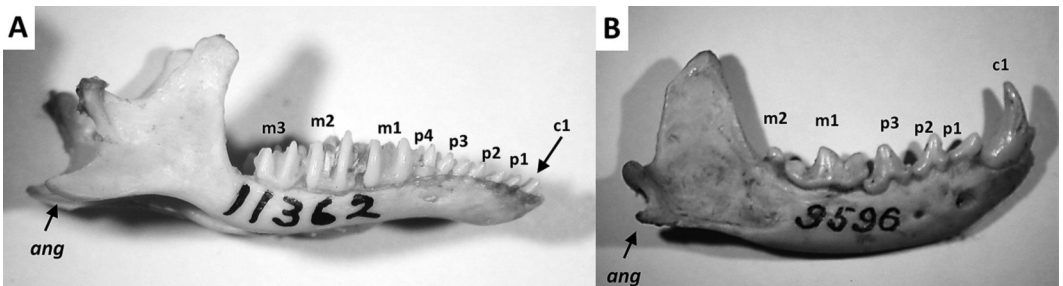


FIGURE 4. (labial view) Size of the angular process as well as the size of the canine compared to the adjacent premolar in soricomorphs (*Parascalops breweri*) (A) and carnivores (*Neovison vison*) (B).

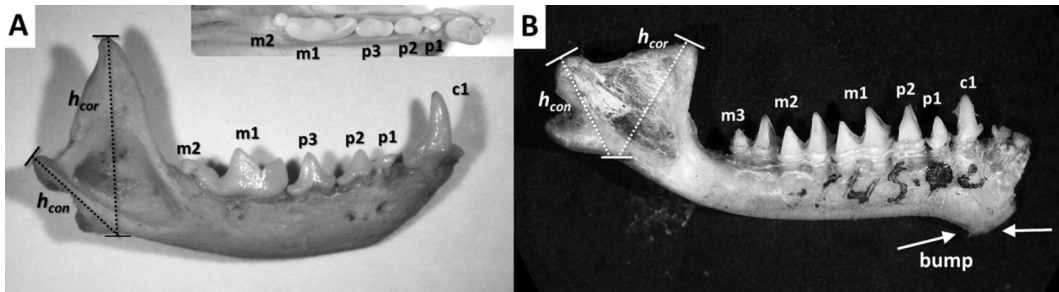


FIGURE 5. (labial view) Dentary bones of carnivores (*Mustela erminea*) (A) and chiropterans (*Perimyotis subflavus*) (B) with the height of the condyle ( $h_{con}$ ), height of the coronoid process ( $h_{cor}$ ), and the conspicuous mandibular bump of chiropterans.

complete absence of teeth on specimens of Cricetidae) may be generalized, the resistance of mandibles to degradation and the number of criteria we included in the key should prove useful in identifying lightly degraded mandibles to the species level.

Sex and age are important factors that may mean that certain mandible criteria may not be useful (because of sexual dimorphism and growth). We acknowledge that this may be a limitation to a key based on osteometry. Identifications conducted on bones of juveniles that are mixed with bones of adult prey may have a lower resolution (i.e., identifications stop at the genus level) than when only adults are present. As a solution, we included in the vast majority of couplets one or more known morphologic characters that are persistent through age and that do not differ between males and females, such as the morphology of the ramus. Using the mandible is also a useful tool for the counting of individual remains and do not necessitate lengthy and costly methods that often require advanced laboratory skills (e.g., identifications using DNA).

This is a new tool for identifying and monitoring all of the small mammals of eastern Canada. To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive key designed in North America that uses the mandible exclusively. Use of the mandible enables degraded specimens of most small mammals to be identified down to the species level and it facilitates counting activities. Moreover, bats of the genera *Myotis*, *Perimyotis*, and *Eptesicus* have declined dramatically in the past few years as a result of the spread of white-nose syndrome (caused by *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*) in the eastern part of the United States and Canada (Blehert *et al.* 2009). Identifying mandibles on the floor of caves and in other hibernacula might be useful for monitoring carcasses.

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## Glossary of terms

Alveolus	Socket in which the roots of a tooth are set (Figures 24, 25, and 28) ( <i>alv</i> ).
Angular process	Posterior and ventral-most bony projection of the mandible; the angular process is posterior to the coronoid process (Figures 1 and 24) ( <i>ang</i> ).
Anteroconid	Anterior-most cusp on the m1 of jumping mice (Figure 19) ( <i>antc</i> ).
Anteromedian fold	Concave fold created by the anteroconid on the anterior part of m1 ( <i>antf</i> ).
Anteroposterior length	Length in the direction of the mandibular tooth row.
Brachydont tooth	Closed-rooted tooth with determinate growth (Figures 22 and 23).
Condyle/condylar process	Bony projection located on the ramus between the coronoid and the angular process (Figures 1 and 24) ( <i>con</i> ).
Coronoid process	Posterior and dorsal-most bony projection of the mandible; the coronoid process is anterior to the angular process (Figures 1 and 24) ( <i>cor</i> ).
Closed triangle (of enamel)	In rodents, the external layer of molars that forms occlusal triangular shapes (Figures 16 and 21) ( <i>ct</i> ).
Mandibular foramen	Small hole located below the temporal fossa and serves as a canal for the dental nerve.
Dentary bone	One side (half) of the mandible.
Diastema (plural: diastemata)	Space between two adjacent teeth (Figure 2) ( <i>dia</i> ).
Enamel	The hard external layer of the tooth.
Horizontal ramus	The anterior part of the dentary that supports the teeth (Figure 1B) ( <i>hra</i> ).
Hypoconid	The most posterior cusp (Figure 24).
Hypsodont tooth	Continually growing tooth. The enamel typically covers most of the tooth. Teeth are rootless (Figures 22 and 23).
Interdenticular space	Space between the cusps present on the incisors of shrews (Figure 30).
Labial	Next to the lips.
Labiolingual width	Length of teeth in the direction perpendicular to the mandibular tooth row.
Length of the mandibular tooth row	Length of the lower tooth row (c1–m3) (Figures 1, 6, 33, 37, and 42).
Lingual	Next to the tongue; the interior of the mouth.
Mandible	Both dentary bones, often referred as the lower jaw ( <i>ma</i> ).
Mandibular tooth row	All contiguous teeth of one dentary bone ( <i>mt</i> ). In Carnivora, Chiroptera, and Soricimorpha, all teeth form the toothrow. In Rodentia and Lagomorpha, premolars and molars form the toothrow.
Mental foramen	Small hole located on the labial face of the horizontal ramus (Figure 24).
Metaconid	Cusp posterior to the anteroconid on the lingual side of m1 in jumping mice.
Occlusal	The side of the teeth which meets with the opposing teeth.
Paraconid	Anterior-most cusp on molars in lateral view (Figure 24).
Pigmentation	Coloration of the teeth ( <i>pg</i> ). It is often dark in shrews.
Postmandibular foramen	Small hole next to the mandibular foramen that connects with the temporal fossa (Figure 30).
Premetaconid fold	Small depression, resembling a trench, separating the anteroconid from the metaconid on the molars of jumping mice (Figure 19) ( <i>prmf</i> ).
Protoconid	Middle cusp on the molars of shrews in lateral view (Figures 19 and 24).
Re-entrant angles	Inward pointing angle defined by the margin of the prismatic molars in voles (Figures 16 and 21) ( <i>ra</i> ).
Temporal fossa	Large opening on the lingual side of the vertical ramus.
Vertical ramus	The posterior part of the dentary, composed of the coronoid, condylar, and angular processes (Figure 1B) ( <i>vra</i> ).



**Key to the mandibles of small mammals of eastern Canada**

(full key illustrated with pictures provided in Supplementary material available at: <http://www.canadianfieldnaturalist.ca>)

**A. General key to small mammals**

1a. Wide diastema between the incisor and molars (Figure 2A) .....	2
1b. No diastema between the incisor and molars (Figure 2B) .....	3
2a. Two premolars and three molars; coronoid process and condylar process not differentiated or coronoid process minute (Figure 3A) .....	Lagomorpha (section B) 5
2b. One premolar or none and three molars; coronoid process clearly differentiated from the condylar process (Figure 3B) .....	Rodentia (section C) 7
3a. Canines and premolars similar in size; well-developed angular process that is often the most posterior part of the dentary bone (Figure 4A) .....	Soricomorpha (section D) 31
3b. Canines two to three times the size of the adjacent premolar; small but robust angular process .....	(Figure 4B) 4
4a. The most posterior molar often much smaller than the most anterior molar; lower edge of ramus without a bump under the canine; height of the coronoid process much higher than the height of the condylar process (Figure 5A) .....	Carnivora (section E) 42
4b. Three W-shaped molars of similar size; lower edge of ramus with a bump under the canine; height of the coronoid process similar in size to or slightly higher than the height of the condylar process (Figure 5B) .....	Chiroptera (section F) 50

**B. Lagomorpha (Leporidae)**

5a. Height of coronoid process >40 mm; length of mandibular tooth row >16 mm (Figure 6A) .....	<i>Lepus arcticus, L. townsendii, L. europaeus</i>
5b. Height of coronoid process <40 mm; length of mandibular tooth row <16 mm (Figure 6B) ....	6
6a. Mental foramen easily visible from the occlusal view (Figure 7A) .....	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>
6b. Mental foramen barely visible from the occlusal view (Figure 7B) .....	<i>Lepus americanus</i>

**C. Rodentia (Cricetidae, Dipodidae, Erethizontidae, Muridae, and Sciuridae)**

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55b. Mandibular length $\leq$ 14 mm (Figure 42); sharp coronoid process approximately same height as c1 (Figure 45B); p2 rectangular with labiolingual width greater than anteroposterior length (Figure 46B) .....	<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>
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