

Critters under the snow



BY DR. DAVID MINNER

Professor, Iowa State University

Questions?

Send them to
David Minner at
Iowa State University, 106
Horticulture Hall,
Ames, IA 50011
or email
dminner@iastate.edu.

Or, send your
question to
Grady Miller at
North Carolina State University,
Box 7620, Raleigh, NC
27695-7620, or email
grady_miller@ncsu.edu.

Some critter has made tunnels, mounds, holes, and trenches in our neighborhood soccer field. What's causing it and how do I get them to go away?

Ames, IA

Thanks for the pictures they sure help when diagnosing problems. A camera is a great tool for any sports turf manager to document their problems and successes as well as for creating a picture record for structures and buried utilities.

The extended snow cover and unfrozen ground this year provided a winter haven for two completely different critters: moles and voles. Mounds of dirt and heaved tunnels are easily identified as mole damage (#1). Unlike the mole runs I see in the summer, some of the mole tunnels were shallow and exposed under the snow (#2) and could have been mistaken for vole runs.

In fact the unfrozen ground and snow cover allowed moles to tunnel



#1 Moles made tunnels and mounds during a hundred days of snow cover in Iowa. **#2** Moles tunneling near the surface and under the snow should not be confused with vole runways.



3 Vole runways made in the grass and thatch above the soil and under the snow.

and feed on worms and other insects during the winter. Voles sometimes use runs made by moles, but voles are not soil moving diggers. Meadow voles make runways just above the soil surface and within the thatch and lower parts of tall grass (#3). They are normally confined to non-mowed grass areas keeping them hidden from avian predators and they have been prolific this year under the snow. When snow leaves voles retreat from mowed lawns to protected areas and there is no need to try and control them. If you feel the need to trap a vole for your collection then try a common wooden snap trap for mice baited with a dab of peanut butter.

Now back to the moles. I expect the activity to be early and heavy this spring as the snow disappears. Moles are more of a nuisance that a major sports turf pest, but spring soccer and ruts in the field constitutes a safety hazard and you should be making an effort get rid of the culprit and improve the playing surface. Rake or drag the mounds of dirt to smooth the surface and use the wheel of a riding mower or utility vehicle to flatten the tunnels. Plant the bare areas with seed or divot mix. Forget about all the gimmicks you might hear about, such as, gum, poison peanuts, wind mills or other lawn ornaments that vibrate, caster beans, drain cleaners,

car exhaust, etc. Regardless of the claim they are not an effective means of getting rid of moles.

Talpirid is bromethalin bait pesticide that looks like a candy worm and can be placed subsurface in the runs to kill moles. If you can't assure that field users and pets will not come in contact with the pesticide then don't use it. Follow all label directions. I have used Talpirid on golf courses and home lawns with some success. You never really know if the moles just left or if they were killed by the pesticide. My preferred method of mole control is trapping, call me if you are not having success; I always get my mole.

But first, consult these guides to help you develop a plan <http://www.themoleman.com> and <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1302b.pdf>. The harpoon and scissor trap are the only effective way to get rid of problem moles. I used the harpoon trap for several years with good success but switched to the scissor trap and had even better success. The keys to both are tending your traps on a daily basis, selecting an active and straight section of the run, and making sure the trap is set properly. I prefer the scissor trap because it is a sturdier device and is seldom set off without catching the mole. The harpoon trap can sometimes push itself out of the ground or miss if the spears do not reach deep into the tunnel.

Over time you will begin to think like the mole and on occasion you will see one actually working the surface in a tunnel. It's a good time to vent your feelings and let any primitive instincts take over...they can be had by a surface assault with a weapon of your choice. It takes 21 mole pelts to make a Chihuahua coat; be sure of your target. ■