



Pocket gopher

Photo courtesy of U.S. National Park Service

I got gophers!

Those little, furry brown varmints in the backyard...they've got more names than you can imagine. Some are printable, some aren't.

There are three important kinds of rodents that are problem makers in home landscapes. They include voles, ground squirrels, and pocket gophers. There are several species within each of these groupings, but we'll refer to them generally with these names.

Pocket gopher

The most reclusive of the three is the pocket gopher (*Geomys spp.*) The animal properly called a pocket gopher spends 99 percent of its time underground. They grow to 6 to 12 inches in length. Their front teeth rest outside of their lips. They have small eyes, big digging claws, cheek pouches (pockets), and a short tail.

Pocket gophers spend most of their lives underground but occasionally are seen excavating their burrow or grabbing a quick bite of your favorite flower growing near their hole. Pocket gophers are easy to detect by the mounds of fresh soil they create.

Pocket gophers eat plants in three ways: 1) they feed on roots they encounter when digging; 2) they may go to the surface, venturing only a body length or so from their tunnel opening to feed on aboveground vegetation; and 3) they pull vegetation into their tunnel from below. Pocket gophers eat broad-leaved plants. They are strict herbivores.

I've got

Voles

Voles, also called meadow mice or field mice, belong to the genus *Microtus*. Voles are compact rodents with stocky bodies, short legs, and short tails. Their eyes are small and their ears partially hidden.

Wyoming hosts several different species of voles. They are similar in size and color to a mouse, but they generally are a bit larger and certainly stockier than mice, and their tails are short – less than a third of



Prairie vole

their total length. Measured from end to end, they are between 4 and 8 inches long from nose tip to end of tail.

Voles occupy a wide variety of habitats. They prefer areas with heavy ground cover of grasses, grass-like plants, or litter. Voles eat a variety of plants – most frequently grasses and forbs. In late summer and fall, they store seeds, tubers, bulbs, and rhizomes. They eat bark at times primarily in fall and winter, and will eat crops, especially when their populations are high.

GOPHERS!

Voles are active day and night, year-round. They do not hibernate. Voles spend a lot of time underground and construct many tunnels and surface runways with numerous burrow entrances. Large population fluctuations are characteristic of voles with a peak every two to five years.

Voles may cause extensive damage to landscape plantings due to their girdling of seedlings and mature shrubs and trees and feeding on herbaceous plants. Vole girdling can be differentiated from girdling by other animals by the non-uniform gnaw marks. They occur at various angles and in irregular patches. Marks are about 1/8-inch wide, 3/8-inch long, and 1/16-inch or more deep. Girdling damage usually occurs in fall and winter. The tunnel systems developed in lawns under the snow often are unsightly after snow melt.

Ground squirrels

Wyoming hosts several species of ground squirrels (*Spermophilus spp*). These are the most noticed of our backyard rodents. They also have the greatest number of common names. A few include chisler, picket pin, pot-gut, gopher, squeekies, whistle-pig, and varmint. All descriptive names!

The ground squirrel's body measures about 8 inches with a tail from 2 to 4 inches long. Ground squirrels eat a variety of food. Most prefer succulent green vegetation (grasses, forbs, and even brush) when available, switching to dry foods, such as seeds, later in the year.

Ground squirrels construct and live in extensive underground burrows, sometimes up to 6 feet deep, with many entrances. They hibernate during the coldest part of the winter. High populations of ground squirrels may pose a serious pest problem.

Others

Gophers, voles, and ground squirrels are the most often-noted landscape rodent pests. There are others, however, which can cause problems. Depending upon location, other problem rodents include beaver, muskrat, shrews, mice, prairie dogs, and moles. Each of them has particular adaptations and habits and maybe, just maybe, a weakness to exploit if they are causing problems.

A local University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service office can help in identifying the varmint and an appropriate course of action.

Effective control methods:

Pocket gophers

Trap or bait?

When setting traps, it isn't absolutely necessary to bait, but bait can be fruit or veggies. Traps should be set in the main burrow facing in either direction to nab the pesky critter coming or going. Poison baiting is another method of control but carefully follow instructions on the product label. Be especially careful if kids, pets, or desirable wildlife frequent the area as these materials can be fatal to other organisms besides gophers.

Fumigation isn't usually effective because the gopher will seal off its burrow to protect itself. Noise devices on the market do not scare gophers. And, no, the researchers tell us that using bubble gum, an urban legend of sorts, won't kill them, either.



Photo courtesy of U.S. National Park Service

Ground squirrel



Direct evidence voles have been active.

Voles

The first step to reducing vole nuisance is to eliminate weeds, ground cover, and litter in and around lawns and landscapes to reduce the attractiveness of these areas to voles. Lawn and turf should be mowed regularly, with a concerted mowing and litter cleanup effort late in the fall. Voles can live in dense populations in ditch banks, rights-of-way, and unmanaged waterways. Adjacent areas can be cost-effectively protected by controlling vegetation through mowing, spraying, or grazing.

Hardware cloth will exclude voles from seedlings and young trees if used to make a "fence" around the trees. The mesh should be 1/4 inch or less in size. Bury a portion of the wire 6 inches to keep voles from burrowing under the fence.

Repellents utilizing thiram (also a fungicide) or capsaicin (the "hot" in chilis) as an active ingredient may give short-term protection.

Traps and baits

Mouse snap traps can be used to control a small population by placing the trap perpendicular to a runway with the trigger end in the runway. A peanut butter-oatmeal mixture or apple slices make good baits. Voles are easiest to trap in fall and late winter.

Ground squirrels

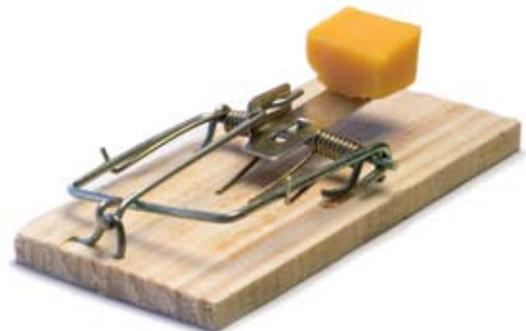
Exclusion is impractical in most cases because ground squirrels are able to dig under or climb over most simple barriers.

Traps and baits

Traps are well suited for removal of small populations of ground squirrels where other control methods are unsatisfactory or undesirable. Anti-coagulant baits must be consumed for a one- to two-week period. If baiting is interrupted, the toxic effects of the chemicals wear off and the animal will recover. Bait placement is critical. Ground squirrels are accustomed to foraging aboveground for their food and are suspicious of anything placed in their tunnel systems. Bait should be scattered adjacent to each active burrow in the amount and manner specified on the label. For safety, baits can be placed in spill-proof containers. Plastic pipe cut into 18- to 24-inch lengths provides a useful bait station

Follow all label instructions if fumigants are used. Shooting on a regular basis may provide relief from ground squirrels living in very small colonies. It is, however, an expensive and time-consuming practice.

The bulk of information used to compile this article comes from "Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage." The manual contains wonderfully detailed and informative articles about nearly every animal which ever created a problem. It can be accessed online at: <http://wildlifedamage.unl.edu/handbook/handbook/>.



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