

# Correctly identifying landscape pests critical for control



Wyoming is host to several varmints that frequently wreak havoc in residential landscapes.

Misidentification of small rodents can lead to homeowner treatments applied to the incorrect species. Correctly identify the animal by assessing the surrounding environment, damage to soil and vegetation, and inspection of the animal itself. Pocket gophers, moles, and voles may seem similar enough, but a closer inspection reveals many differences between these pests.

**Pocket gophers** are rodents that feed on roots and vegetation. While there are different species of pocket gophers, they generally appear similar, create similar damage, and control measures are equally effective. These rodents are 5-10 inches long, have small eyes and ears, and a short tail. Contrary to popular belief, cheek pouches are

not used for carrying soil. Pocket gophers use their long, curved claws and long, yellowish incisor teeth to loosen the soil and then push it to the surface using their chest and forefeet.

Pocket gophers build mounds to conceal the entrance of the burrow system, which may involve 200 yards of tunnels below the soil surface. Horseshoe-shaped mounds built by gophers are about 1-1.5 feet wide and less than 8 inches high. Soil-filled tunnels seen above ground are called eskers and are typically found in the spring as pocket gophers are active under the snow in winter.

**Moles**, classified as insectivores, can consume 70 to 100 percent of their body weight in insects, larvae, and worms each day. Slightly smaller than pocket gophers, moles are typically 4-6

inches long. Their fur is velvet-like in texture, short in length, and from gray to dark brown in color. Moles have short tails, almost indistinguishable eyes, and a long, pink snout. Their forefeet are wide and paddle-like with short claws.

Descriptions of the animals themselves are helpful, yet moles are rarely seen above ground, making identification of mounds and tunnels crucial. Mole mounds are more circular with the entrance at the center of the mound compared to the fan-shaped mound with the entrance plug on the edge of a pocket gopher mound. Tunnels created by moles are visible at the surface as feeding occurs in the top few inches of the soil. A landscape with mole tunnels will feel spongy or squishy.

Similar to pocket gophers, **voles** are herbivorous rodents. Frequently called meadow or field mice, voles



*Pocket gopher*



*Mole*



*Vole*

appear similar to actual mice; however, voles have shorter tails, smaller ears, larger eyes, and are much stockier than mice.

Voles typically do not create mounds like moles and pocket gophers. They also do not create tunnels, but rather runways or tracks that are open. Burrow holes tend to be found near a rock. Young trees or shrubs are preferred food for voles, especially when the lower portion of the vegetation is covered with snow.

Prevention and control methods for these pests vary based on several aspects. Recommendations and/or products can be found at your local University of Wyoming Extension or weed and pest district office.

The key to ensuring you receive helpful feedback is providing proper identification, an accurate description, or photos of damage and habitat.

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Gophers, voles, moles beware. **Jenna Meeks** is the assistant supervisor with the Goshen County Weed and Pest Control District. She can be reached at (307) 532-3713 or at [gocoweeds@gmail.com](mailto:gocoweeds@gmail.com).

## Effective control methods

### Pocket gophers

When setting traps, it isn't absolutely necessary to bait, but fruit or veggies can be added as bait. Traps should be set in the main burrow with openings facing in either direction to nab the pesky critter coming or going. Poison baiting is another method of control but great care must be taken to 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, researchers tell us using bubble gum, an urban legend of sorts, won't kill them, either.

### 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.

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.

### Moles

Trapping is a common control method for moles; however, moles are very sensitive to foreign objects in their tunnels, so traps should straddle, encircle, or be suspended over the tunnel.

Determine which tunnels are active by regularly tamping down short sections of runways and then observing which ones become raised again. Traps should be set at least 18 inches away from a mound.

Deep runways are typically used on a more permanent basis than shallow tunnels and may be a more effective location for control measures.

Repellents and frightening devices have seen limited success. Grain-based baits, such as pellets used for pocket gophers, are not effective against moles, but there are products available to mimic their diet staples of worms and insects. These gel-type baits may be effective if label directions are followed closely.

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 that ever created a problem. It can be accessed online at: <http://bit.ly/prevention-control>.

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Effective control measures is excerpted from "I've got gophers!" in the fall 2006 issue of *Barnyards & Backyards*. For the full article, visit [bit.ly/i-have-gophers](http://bit.ly/i-have-gophers).