

Wild Things: Moles

BY MARGARET BAIRD

They are perhaps the stealthiest of our wild neighbors, the animals we least often see. But the comings and goings of moles are plenty obvious on suburban real estate. To the consternation of many a homeowner and golf course manager, the tunneling handiwork of these underground dwellers disrupts the sight lines of lawns manicured to perfection and can make mowing a trial.

Moles don't hibernate—they just dig deeper the colder it gets. But they are especially active during their breeding season from late winter to early spring. That's why most mole "damage" tends to occur during this time, as these critters tunnel about in the moist, thawed-out surface soil and leave those telltale pushed-up mounds of earth in their wake.

Now is also when you're most likely to hear from members of the lawn-owning public who are alarmed—or enraged—about the sudden excavated appearance of their back forty and determined to engage in "moley wars" against these burrowers. There are a staggering array of mole-control and trapping devices on the market, many inhumane and of questionable effectiveness.

But the quest for a mole-free yard is really all about America's love affair with the lawn, not the limited cosmetic damage and inconvenience wrought by these critters. With the trend in recent years toward more natural, eco-friendly gardening and reducing turf grass, the tarnished reputation of the lowly mole may yet turn. In fact, it's more than a little ironic how much good moles really do for the earth—and Earth—compared to resource-guzzling lawns.

There are seven species of moles in North America, the most common being the eastern mole and the rather extraterrestrial-looking star-nosed mole. Despite their somewhat mousy appearance, moles aren't rodents. With their comically large paddle-shaped front paws, naked snouts, and tiny pinpoint eyes, moles are



MARCIN PAWINSKI/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

unique in the animal kingdom and have been placed in their own exclusive family (*Talpidae*).

It's those paws that make them the Michael Phelps of subterranean swimming: Moles can dig tunnels at a gold medal-worthy rate of nearly 20 feet an hour. All that digging and churning also earns moles kudos as one of nature's most masterful soil aerators, which keeps soil healthy by turning and mixing the nutrients that feed plants.

Then there's the mole diet—another reason to value these animals as green space friends, not foes. Primarily invertebrate eaters, moles especially go for earthworms and grubs (larval beetles), while also chowing down on the occasional snail, centipede, and insect. Grubs, you say? Yes, the very same grass-killing grubs that remain the bane of the turf industry are lip-smacking delicious to moles.

Where moles are numerous, it's likely that there's an abundant food source—and that means that killing moles is a pointless exercise, since more will quickly move into the vacated digs. Populations tend to fluctuate from year to year, so a season of many moles may precede one of few.

The soundest advice for dealing with moles is ... to not deal with them. Peaceful coexistence and simple habitat management strategies are the way

to go. Step on surface mole tunnels or use a lawn roller to flatten them before mowing. Avoid overwatering lawns, since moisture keeps mole prey near the surface and thus leads to more mole tunnels. And over the long term, consider converting at least some lawn space to low-maintenance, native plant landscaping—where moles will not only be tolerated, but welcomed as valued assets. **AS**

MouthPieces

MouthPieces is a new department designed to help you communicate your messages to the public.

We'll be running pieces that you can use; just add your organization's contact information and hang them in your lobby or hand them out at the front desk. And you don't need to tear out the page: Just go to animalsheltering.org/mouthpieces to download and print a clean .pdf copy.

What do you need to tell your visitors? Send your suggestions to asm@humansociety.org and we'll see if we can work them into a future MouthPieces!

