

Moles - A Right Pain in the Grass!

Only about four inches long and practically invisible for most of the year, this half-blind, bumbling animal is the cause of more nightmares to gardeners and groundsmen than any other creature.

Most people like to share their gardens with wild animals. They add life and movement, and some of us even go out of our way to attract them with food and artificial houses. Cute, furry mammals are definitely high on our welcome list. Squirrels, dormice, hedgehogs, badgers and even foxes are tolerated in urban areas. But there are exceptions. Some animals are definitely more equal than others.

ENDEARING?

It's funny to think that the endearing Mr. Mole from the book 'Wind in the Willows' has been such a popular character with us for around 100 years now. Yet when a mole comes tunnelling into your garden lawn the last word to enter your head is 'endearing'. If you're a groundsman, any fond thoughts of the charming little short-sighted mammal quickly give way to more vengeful plans on how to dispatch the destructive little monster to the great earthworks in the sky.

Of course moles have been around a lot longer than garden lawns - about 7,000 years longer in fact, when the British Isles first sepa



The Mole (*Talpa europaea*)

rated from the land mass of Europe. Back then, these islands were covered in forests, which is really the natural habitat of the mole. Over the centuries it has moved to where the earthworms are most abundant - just below the surface of well watered lawns!

DIG FOR VICTORY

In order to catch all those juicy worms, which moles are so fond of, they need to dig for them, and these guys are specialists at digging. If there was an Olympic gold medal for digging they'd leave the other competitors standing. These guys are serial tunnellers. They can shift about 6 kilos (13lbs) of soil every 20 minutes. That's like an average person moving four tonnes!

Now when you're digging all those tunnels the excavated soil has to go somewhere, and it ends up in

neat little heaps, known as 'mole-heaves' on the surface. Every couple of metres the mole digs a vertical shaft, straight up to the surface, and pushes all the freshly dug soil up and out of it. The sudden, overnight appearance of mounds of earth on a well manicured lawn are a sure sign that a mole has taken up residence.

Any keen gardener naturally feels annoyed when molehills appear in their garden. The sight of all those mounds of soil can give the impression that a whole army of moles have moved in, but it's nearly always the work of just one animal. Moles are solitary animals and are extremely

territorial. They won't allow another mole to enter their territory... and their territories can cover more than a quarter of an acre.

GOOD THINGS COME TO THOSE...

If you want to catch a mole you will need a lot of patience and you need to do it when the mole is setting up home. The freshly sifted soil pushed up by the mole contains many small worms and other creepy-crawlies which garden birds love. Blackbirds and thrushes know that they can get an easy meal by simply waiting by an active molehill. By watching the birds at work you can locate the position of the mole. Take a small garden fork and a box and walk gently towards the active molehill. The mole can feel the vibrations of your footsteps so walk very lightly. When you see the mole appear flick it up out of the tunnel with the fork and catch it in your box.

Moving a mole to another area is a risky thing to do, and throwing the mole over the fence into the neighbours garden is not clever, and it's not a solution. As I mentioned earlier, moles are very territorial, and just

MOLE FACTS

- They grow to a length of 15cms (6 inches)
- A male mole is called a 'boar' and a female is called a 'sow'
- They have 44 teeth, more than any other mammal in Britain
- They have a lifespan of around three years
- A mole can do a complete u-turn anywhere in its network of dark, underground tunnels

like humans, they can fight to the death over a patch of ground. Ideally look for an area of ground with an absence of molehills.

LIVING WITH MOLES

Despite what many people say, it is possible to have a good lawn and a resident mole. The tunnelling activity usually only lasts for a few days while the mole completes its network of tunnels and chambers. After that the molehills stop appearing. The only other times you'll see molehills are when the mole is doing some routine maintenance, or during the winter months when the soil is frozen and the moles have to dig a bit deeper to find food.

If you allow your mole to stay, it's possible you may even grow to pity it. Moles are one of the most persecuted animals in history, and more is known about trapping and killing moles than is known about its secretive, solitary lifestyle. There's no "Save the Mole Society" but if you look in the phone directory under Pest Control you're almost certain to find someone willing to "take care" of a mole for you.

FASHION ICONS

There was one brief period in history when moles were admired. Sadly the mole wasn't able to appreciate it's moment of popularity. During the late 1800's moleskin clothing was the height of fashion. Among other things it was used to make ladies coats and waistcoats for gentlemen. To fuel the fashion, people



Ever wondered why moles are so unpopular?

known as 'wanters' made a living out of catching moles for their skins. By the early 1900's a million skins a year were being sold in London and twelve million a year were being shipped to the United States. Small wonder they spend most of their lives hiding from us.

TUNNEL VISION

Moles have poor eyesight, but then good eyesight in a dark environment is useless anyway. As any miner will tell you, life underground is very dark. Moles rely on hearing, scent and touch to find their way around and locate food.

Living and working underground means you miss sunrises and sunsets. The good thing about this is you can wake up and go to sleep when you like. A moles day lasts for about four hours. At least it's active for four hours, and then it sleeps for four hours. By the time we've worked an eight hour day, the mole has experienced one full day and night and is about to start another

day. If you've done any digging recently you'll understand why. It's tiring.

CLEAN

Despite grovelling around in mud all day moles are one of the cleanest wild mammals around. Their short, waterproof fur helps to keep the dirt out. The hairs stand vertically so they can be brushed in any direction. Perfect for moving backwards and forwards through tight spaces.

SAVING UP FOR A SUNNY DAY

Moles aren't greedy. They only eat enough worms to satisfy their appetite. Any surplus worms have their heads bitten off to immobilise them and then they are stored in a chamber known as a 'mole larder'. These can be useful if the weather turns dry and the worms move deeper into

the soil. The alternative is to hunt above ground, which they sometimes do, but it's a risky game. Upstairs are where the predators lurk like; owls, foxes, weasels and domestic cats.

MOLE MATES

The love life of a mole could hardly be described as romantic, at least not by our standards. The mole mating season occurs around February or March. Normally, when a male mole meets a female mole they fight, but in early spring male moles leave their homes in search of romance. When a male finds a female he is often met with aggression, but if he is accepted mating will occur. After just a few hours the male returns to his home and resumes his solitary life.

The female is left to rear the young. They are born blind and bald, yet within five weeks they are just about independent of their mother and she drives them away to find territories of their own. This is the one time of year when you might see a mole. For a few weeks the young scramble around among grass, like a seal out of water, catching what food they can and trying to avoid being caught themselves. If they are lucky, they will find a vacant territory and start tunnelling.

ABOUT THIS FACTSHEET

This factsheet is one of a series written and published by UK Safari - a website for anyone interested in the wildlife and countryside of Britain. UK Safari also publish a free monthly nature newsletter. Visit: www.uksafari.com