

VOLE WARS

David Pollitt

For many years we have periodically suffered mole damage in our garden, particularly in our lawns. Most gardeners are familiar with those mounds of fine earth which, incidentally, make good potting compost. They are connected underground by tunnels just beneath the surface. Ridges are formed and the grass turns yellow, as the moles search among the roots for our precious earthworms. The ground becomes soft, and sinks in when you tread on it. The damage can be extensive, suggesting an army of moles is at work, but in fact it is probably a single animal that has wreaked the havoc, as they are solitary creatures and command large territories. A mature, active mole was trapped and removed from our garden some two months ago and no new damage has been seen since. But it seems the aftermath of his tenancy, visible across large swathes of the lawn, may not have been his doing at all, and he may be the victim of a miscarriage of justice.



A perfect vole hole



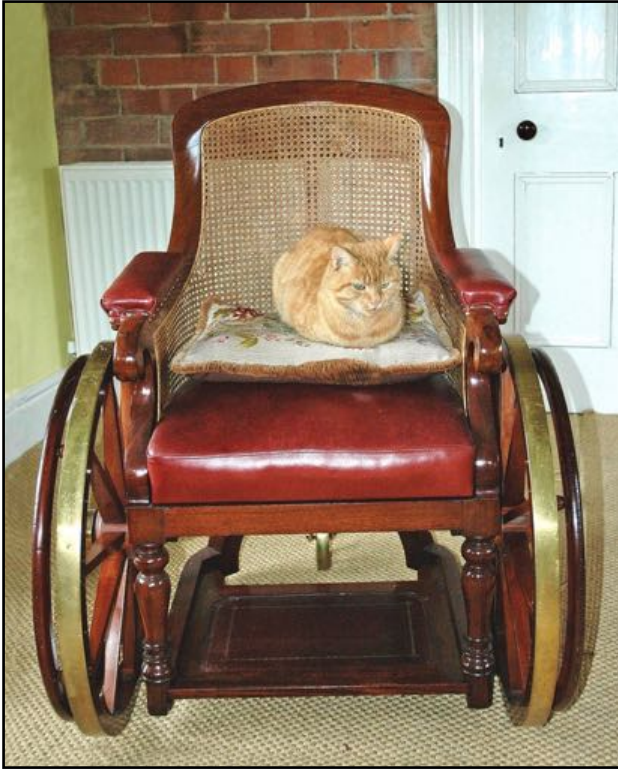
Vole damage in turf

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After researching the subject, my conclusion is that the tunnels and holes that interlace the lawns like watercourses are the work of voles (*Microstis agrestis*). Like moles, voles tunnel just beneath the surface but do not throw up mounds of earth. (Where does the displaced soil go?) But they do produce tell-tales holes - escape holes - one to two inches in diameter, at intervals of four to six inches. In the flower beds, this activity may not be spotted but in the lawns and on our clay, however, the tunnels open up into wide cracks as the earth dries and contracts in the summer. The holes can become quite large cavities, capable of leading to a twisted ankle.

In appearance, voles are not dissimilar to mice, but have shorter tails, and more rounded heads when viewed in profile. They are active all year round and can produce a hundred offspring in a year. The life span is normally around three to six months. For years, what we took to be mice, brought in by past generations of cats, were almost certainly voles. We are surrounded by mixed field hedges which provide a perfect habitat, as voles do not like being in the open where they are exposed to predators; weed-suppressing membranes also offer excellent cover. Burrows in the compost bins will be their work too, and if you whip the lid off quickly you will often see the rear end of a vole disappearing down a hole.

Visually disarming, voles are far more damaging in the garden than moles. Their activity in the borders and vegetable plot can have serious consequences, as they like to nibble away at the roots of plants. On pulling up a plant that has suddenly died, you may find that the root has been eaten through at the base. With their incisors, they will happily strip the bark off a plant or tree at ground level. Sown pea and bean seeds will disappear overnight. They have been a pest in the greenhouse for a number of years and we now protect our crocuses and tulip bulbs in pots using wire netting, but outside in the garden such precautions are not really practical. We have tried



Ginger, enjoying his retirement

soaking crocus, tulip and fritillary bulbs in paraffin or original tonic water (with quinine) prior to planting, but all to no avail.

Given the reproductive capability of voles, controls, protective measures and repellents are not the answer; extermination is unfortunately the only option. Poisons and traps are widely available but predation must be the favourite. As so often, nature holds the answer; in this case, in the form of birds of prey. Yet this is something over which the gardener has little control. Buzzards frequent our garden, and individual birds may be seen keeping a beady eye open before gliding to the ground to peck in the grass for a few moments, but we have never seen one catch a vole and they have even turned a blind eye to rabbits.

Enter *Felix domesticus*, in our case in the form of Ginger, who adopted us a couple of years ago when he helped do battle with rabbits. But Ginger, deaf, and blind in one eye, is getting on in years and may have to be joined by a friend or two if the war is to be won.

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