K-STATE Research and Extension | Wildcat District

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Diagnosing Digging in Lawns

From late spring into summer, it is common to receive questions regarding what animal is digging holes in a lawn or flowerbed. While a few different animals could be the culprits, for this article, we will focus on moles.

Moles are small mammals that spend most of their lives in underground burrows. The Eastern Mole is the only type of mole that resides in Kansas. Moles are rarely seen by humans, and when they are, they are often mistaken for meadow mice because they are similar in appearance and size. An easy way to tell a mole apart from a meadow mouse is their paddle-like forefeet and prominent toenails, which enable moles to “swim” through the soil. Another way to tell Moles apart from mice is that moles lack external ears.

Moles can be found in a variety of habitats, from woods to lawns in town. As they construct extensive shallow surface tunnels for spring, summer, and fall, and deeper, more permanent tunnels for winter use, moles are eating a diet that includes snail larvae, spiders, small vertebrates, earthworms, and occasionally a small amount of vegetation to meet their high energy requirements (earthworms and white grubs are their favorite foods). Signs of mole activity in lawns usually appear as ridges of upheaved soil created where moles constructed tunnels as they moved about, foraging for food. A telltale sign of mole activity is mounds of soil, also referred to as molehills, brought to the surface as they dig deeper; permanent tunnels; and nest cavities. A molehill by a tunnel entrance is the easiest way to determine if moles or voles are digging in a lawn.

Moles are seldom noticed until their tunneling activity becomes noticeable in lawns. As the roots of the grass are disturbed by moles' tunneling, the grass may turn brown, revealing where tunnels lie beneath the surface. When mole activity becomes widespread in a lawn, homeowners may choose to take control measures. While there are many baits on the market to control moles, Kansas State University wildlife expert Drew Ricketts said, “Poison baits fail to work because moles feed on earthworms and grubs, not vegetable matter,” going on to say that “Even grub control products are ineffective because they do not control earthworms,” which are an important food source for moles. Grim as it may sound, traps are the best control method for moles, according to Ricketts.

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