

Is it a Vole or a Mole?
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Several calls have been coming in regarding annual lawn problems that seem to be more severe following a winter with heavy snow accumulations. One problem in particular has been causing homeowners some concern here in Rapid City. Several people have reported runways left in their yard after the snow melts. These runways are caused by voles, not to be mistaken for moles. One recent caller was confused about voles and moles so I ended up referring to them as voles with a “v” and moles with an “m”. There are several differences to note other than the “v” and the “m” in their names.

Voies feed on plant material (seeds, grasses, tubers, and even tree bark) and occasionally they will feed on insects, snails, or animal remains. These rodents are what we refer to as “field mice”. They have short legs and tails and stocky bodies. There are 23 different species of voles in the genus *Microtus* in the United States. They are usually brown or gray in color and have small eyes and partially hidden ears.

Moles on the other hand eat grubs and earthworms that they find in the soil. They spend their entire life underground with the exception of accidental surfacing. Moles “swim” through loose soil and prefer areas that are abundant in the food they seek. They form mounds on the surface that are smaller than pocket gopher mounds. They have a hairless snout that extends nearly a half inch in length and they do not have external ears. Moles have large front feet with webbed toes and claws and the back feet are small and narrow with claws. There are seven species of moles in North America.

What can be done about voles and moles if a problem is noted? Unfortunately, at this time, nothing, as the damage is done. To prevent damage next winter I suggest cleaning up any areas that would serve as cover for them and using baits that contain an anticoagulant or spraying your lawn with hot pepper spray (capsaicin) or a fungicide that contains thiram before snow. For now just lightly rake the loose thatch and apply some grass seed to the damaged areas. These critters are off eating other stuff now. If you suspect a mole you will want to get some traps and insert them into the burrows as they will continue to feed in your yard. You can also apply an insecticide to reduce the grub population and starve the critter out. This rule applies to all pests. Get rid of their food supply and they will go away (usually).

Don't worry about voles getting into your house; they really want to be outdoors eating plant material and would not do well inside. True mice on the other hand love to infest our homes and eat what we eat.

Source: John M. O'Brien, Nevada Department of Agriculture and F. Robert Henderson, Kansas State University respectively.

More information on horticultural topics can be found by visiting us online 24 hours a day on the Pennington County web site, <http://www.co.pennington.sd.us/extension/extsvc.html>, or by calling me at (605) 394-2188. If email is your thing drop me a line at ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.