

**What's with all the Tunnels in My Yard?**  
**Rick Abrahamson**  
**SD Cooperative Extension Educator-Horticulture**  
**For Week of March 21, 2011**

Last week I received many calls concerning vole damage in yards. Several people have reported runways left in their yard after the snow melts. The runways, caused by voles, are particularly a problem when snow accumulates and the voles' tunnel under the snow to feed. Unfortunately, like many other turf problems, when the damage is detected there is little that can be done to correct it. After the snow is gone voles usually move out of the area as their protection from predators is gone. They usually move to tall weedy areas at this time.

My advice for yards with vole damage is to rake up the loose thatch, fertilize, water, and wait for the turf to re-grow. If extensive damage is present overseeding or renovation might be the best choice to repair the lawn. If the voles are still present in the lawn mouse traps can be placed in several locations perpendicular to the tunnels with the trigger in the tunnel. There is no need for baiting the traps as the voles will run across the trigger as they move through the tunnels.

Voies can also damage trees and shrubs by gnawing on bark and often results in a girdling of the trunk. Usually this damage will kill the tree or canes of the shrub affected. Prune out and canes that have damage on the shrubs and consider performing a bridge graft on any trees that have girdling damage. Hardware cloth can be used to exclude voles from young trees if the hardware cloth is dug six inches into the soil and extends upward past the anticipated snow depth. Install in the fall and be sure keep it well away from the trunk of the tree to avoid mechanical injury.

To prevent damage next winter I suggest cleaning up any areas that would serve as cover for them and use baits that contain an anticoagulant or spraying your lawn with hot pepper spray (capsaicin) or a fungicide that contains thiram before the snow flies. Baits containing zinc phosphide can be used to reduce the population in the weedy areas they occupy during the summer and fall. Be careful with zinc phosphide as it can be toxic to dogs and cats if they eat dead voles.

Voies feed on plant material and occasionally on insects, snails, or animal remains. These rodents are what some people refer to as "field mice". They have short legs and tails and stocky bodies. There are 23 different species of voies in the genus *Microtus* in the United States. They are usually brown or gray in color and have small eyes and partially hidden ears.

Don't worry about voies 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.

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](mailto:ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu).