

MANAGEMENT

A Greenkeeper's Rough Guide to Golf Course Pests

What is a pest? The bane of your life maybe someone's affectionate pet or the delightful fluffy bunnies scampering across the fairways or playfully digging holes in the bunkers. Andrew Venables gives some advice on pest control.

The dictionary definition of a pest is 'a troublesome or destructive person or creature'. Some greenkeepers have been heard to include golfers under this first category, but the law of the land forbids the ultimate solution, so this leaves us to consider the second category of creatures.

The average golfer seeks an interesting test of his ability in attractive surroundings where both the fairways and greens comprise top quality turf.

For the purpose of this article I will confine most of my observations to the damage caused by two pest creatures, rabbits and moles, ignoring the sometimes greater pest, Mr Average Golfer, who can cause havoc on fine turf through his uncontrolled wielding of a lump of metal at the end of a long handle.

For many the opportunity to see

wildlife in a rural setting, is an added bonus to an enjoyable round of golf. With the notable exception of mole activity, many of the animals inhabiting our courses are a real asset to the countryside in sensible numbers, but any one species which reaches plague proportions, becomes unattractive and an economic liability.

Pest Control involves maintaining a balance - unnatural imbalances and man made situations conspire to favour population explosions in one species or another and before long that species can become a pest.

By planning a mixture of riddance, exclusion, and removal of food and shelter it is possible to restore a 'status quo'. It is then vital to maintain the established equilibrium as prevention is far more cost effective than cure.

So much of the work of pest control is 'fire fighting' and very much more expensive than anticipating the problem with a 'fire prevention' programme.

The scope of the whole subject of pest control is infinite due to the variation in sites, circumstances, conditions and personal opinion of the degree of damage one is prepared to accept, but I will expand on the control of some of our native mammals and insects which commonly cause grassland problems and suggest some suitable remedies.

The mole was mentioned earlier and is an ideal subject to begin.

Native to England and Scotland and Wales, there are no moles in Ireland other than the 'informing variety'. Their main runs follow the



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line of hedges, streams and ditches, fanning out into a maze of feeding tunnels like the veins of a leaf.

Their shovel shaped front feet dig quickly into fresh ground where they seek out a staple diet of earthworms and grubs. Soft moist soil in large quantities is then thrown up, completely disproportionate to the number and size operating in a given area.

Moles are solitary creatures meeting only to breed in the Spring. The observant mole watcher can spot the signs when the long straight surface runs become visible sometime between February and June.

Just one litter a year is normal, raised in a nest of grass or dry leaves in an enlarged part of a deep tunnel. Gestation lasts about four weeks and the litter of between two and seven off-spring are ready to leave the nest at five weeks old.

Appalling mole problems when the hills appear thick and fast overnight, seldom yield more than five or six to the acre.

The village trapper, his methods wrapped in mystic and family folklore can keep the population in check, but little more.

To eradicate mole damage entirely there are just two commercially effective methods and maybe a couple of 'also rans'.

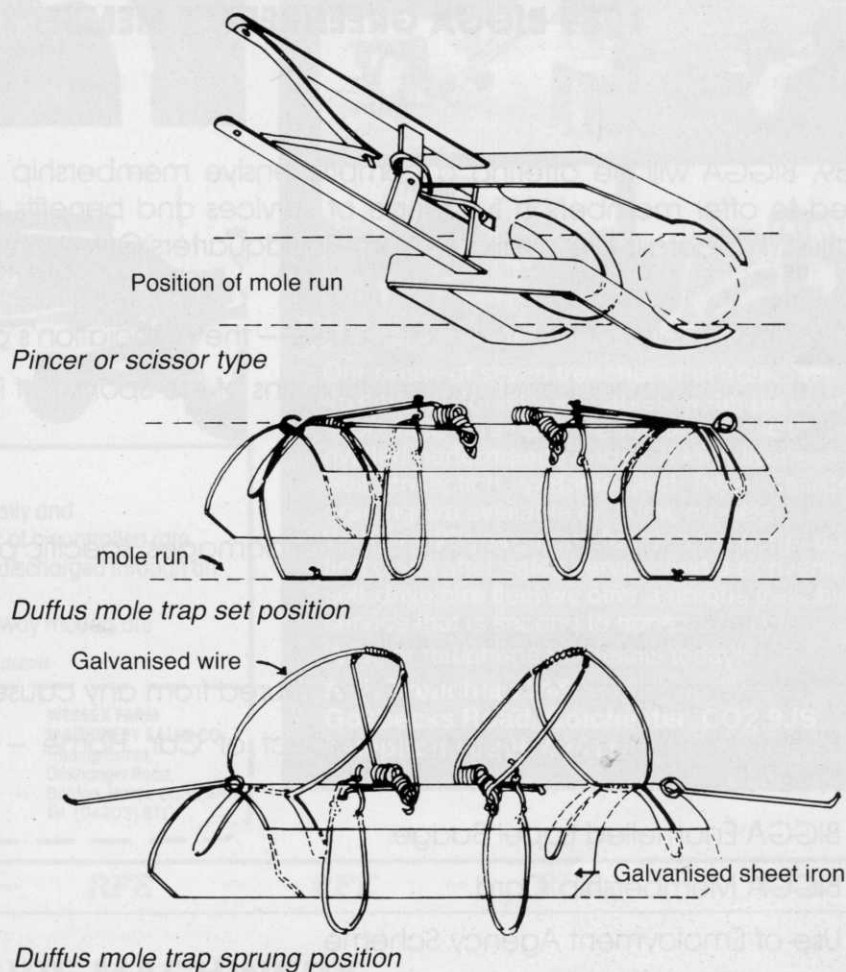
The most cost effective is poison baiting, requiring far less time and labour than trapping and when done correctly is a perfectly safe method both for humans and other animals.

Poison baiting using strychnine can be carried out on all agricultural land including golf courses subject to MAFF and ADAS controls and guidelines. It should be done by a fully trained commercial operative not only to eliminate the risks that this deadly poison can create, but it is sound business practice to give the job to someone who knows what he is doing and who can complete the work in the most cost effective way.

The cost of eradicating severe mole problems can vary according to the site, severity of infestation and neighbouring land. It can be as low as £1.00 an acre with a small problem on a large acreage to £5 an acre where the concentration of activity is confined.

A 'one-off' blitz is the most efficient method of removing moles,

THREE TYPES OF MOLE TRAP



but a follow-up treatment to mop up the inevitable survivors is vital for the long term control.

This can be easily achieved by site training your own staff in the use of gas pellets and mechanical trapping.

Where poisons cannot be used by the professionals, trapping is the next best method, but it is an art which has to be taught.

The correct use of the scissor and Druffus mole traps is best shown on the course with practical demonstrations. It requires a high degree of skill not only in positioning the trap so the wary mole is caught, but in locating the main run used as the mole's motorway to the feeding area.

Traps placed out near the mole hills or haphazardly by the uninformed is depressingly ineffective. Considerable care must be taken to excavate the trap site ensuring nothing will give the mole a clue to the presence of danger.

The hands that set the trap dare

not carry traces of nicotine, oil, or other noxious substances or the foraging mole will perform a smart about turn and find another route.

Once the area is cleared, watch out for a further invasion. Moles from neighbouring land not under your own control will start reinfestation as soon as the boundaries and tunnel systems are empty. Kill on entry is the only answer, otherwise within weeks it is back to square one.

And now to the other methods! Poison gas tablets can be useful but they are not very reliable particularly on sandy or well drained soil as most golf courses are.

You can shoot them with a 12 bore as long as someone can spare the time to sit in the field and wait for a soil heave.

Mole smokes will move them on to dig a whole new set of tunnels and hills once the old runs become too smelly for comfort.

Sprinkled broken glass, white-thorn branches, old exhaust pipes,

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milk bottles, hosepipe, electric vibrators, children's plastic windmills on sticks, proprietary baits and other old wives tales will create inconvenience but little more. You may find an odd mole who died laughing, but it was more likely its demise was from old age.

By all means try them but not on our recommendation and certainly not if it costs anything. Complete control is only possible with professional help, backed by continuous monitoring by your own staff on a daily basis.

And now to rabbits, but where does one start? They are synonymous with breeding, can scratch, dig, despoil, destroy newly planted trees, turn a bunker into a children's sand pit or create a complimentary hold for putting on the green.

They may well feed and frolic on your hallowed acres, but live in comparative safety on neighbouring land across the way.

Myxomatosis, whatever view you may hold on the disease is no longer having the total extermination effect of twenty years ago. Rabbits are recovering from the infection and in many cases developing an immunity.

Their non feeding periods have changed from the deep burrows in banking to spending daylight hours in shallow depressions and deep undergrowth, though with continuous predation, they can be controlled but seldom exterminated.

Rabbits can be trapped, snared, ferreted, shot, gassed or caught by dogs. If asked which method I would recommend, I would reply "At least three of them, and any three will do!"

Work of this type can obviously be provided on a professional basis. Much can also be done voluntarily by the thousands of keen fieldsportsmen around the country. Many belong to shooting organisations such as the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (B.A.S.C.), carrying full 3rd party insurance.

Gassing holes and warrens is a worthwhile operation and can be done by staff using Phostoxin tablets in systems, which are observed to be active. Professional instruction is advisable to gain the best

effect from this method, the same applies to trapping and snaring.

Rabbits can now be fenced out simply and effectively using 3 or 4 strand electric fencing systems fixed low down at 3, +3½, +4, +4½ inch wire spacings. This method has been pioneered by Gallaghers Power Fencing, UK at Coventry. It is widely used by market gardeners, field scale horticulturalists, and farmers and is often the only practicable method of stopping damage, especially when rabbits are coming from adjoining property.

These fences, and others at different spacings are equally effective in controlling badgers, foxes and deer. They are far less obtrusive than other methods. Further information and advice can be obtained from the manufacturers.

Rabbit control is a long term project. A professionally drawn up plan of campaign combining riddance and exclusion is the first and most important step.

Many creatures cannot fairly be described as pests but will occasionally cause damage or create nuisance. Crows, other corvines and seagulls sometimes develop a taste for golf balls. Unprotected species can be stopped by removing the individual responsible. One normally only gets one shot at a crow, before the difference between a 5 iron and a 12 bore is learned.

The presence of large numbers of Cockchafer grubs in fairways and in the 'rough' will often lead to major excavations by rooks and badgers. The cure on areas frequently damaged lies in spraying the turf to kill the grubs and leather jackets, not in destroying the rooks and badgers - another example of, remove the food and the pest moves on! Likewise create a barrier, like electric fencing between a feeding area and shelter habitat and the pest feeds elsewhere.

Wildlife is something to be encouraged on golf courses. The provision of rough natural areas and ponds for conservation will enhance the appeal of any such Club. Staff trained to recognise and treat developing problems will make such areas both rewarding and valuable.

Professional consultation, service, staff training and co-ordinated help, provide the link between wildlife and habitat conservation and damage prevention.

To return to my opening question, 'What is a pest?' - some things are always pests, and anything can be a pest. Everything has its place, but it doesn't have to be on your place.

Andrew Venables is an expert in pest control systems specialising in assisting golf clubs.

He operates A & R Fairway Pest Control from Tywyn, North Wales offering both consultancy on pest problems, staff training or eradication.

OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

17th-23rd JULY, 1989

If you wish to assist with bunker-raking and other duties at Troon, please forward your name and address to the Executive Director as soon as possible with an indication of the dates on which you are available. Please note that assistance is needed for the practice days as well as the four Championship days.

Preference will be given to those members who can make themselves available for the whole period.