



# ANIMAL INSTINCTS

**A** number of mammal and bird species, such as rabbits, badgers, Canada geese and moles, are known to cause problems on golf courses.

Greenkeepers are the ones who have to deal with the problems – humanely. Public attitudes to wildlife management are such that the welfare of wildlife is quite properly a major concern and therefore greenkeepers will have to manage these animals in a humane manner. There is also legislation in place which prescribes the way in which many animals can be managed.

Wildlife on a golf course may be of considerable ecological importance and in addition may make a course more marketable in terms of the course's aesthetic appeal.

Therefore, the objectives must be to manage any species only when numbers increase to a level where they are causing economic losses to the course and then only

to take such measures as necessary to reduce losses to non-economic levels.

Problems encountered and management solutions available are detailed below:

## RABBITS

Rabbits cause problems by digging burrows and these are particularly prevalent on slopes and banks where drainage of water is more efficient. Digging occurs throughout the year but is more common in spring when new nesting sites are being dug in preparation for the birth of young. On flat ground, burrows are usually no more than 1m deep. Rabbits also cause damage by digging smaller, shallow scrapes in the soil and by eating the bark of newly planted young trees.

Under the 1954 Pests Act, it remains the legal obligation of occupiers of land to take steps to destroy wild rabbits on their land

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## ● Fencing can be 90 per cent effective

or, if this is not practical, to prevent rabbits from causing damage on adjoining land. Rabbit numbers can be reduced by gassing their burrows, by ferreting, trapping or shooting but gassing is at least twice as effective as any of the other techniques. Numbers are best reduced between November and March because they are at their lowest at this time of year due to natural mortality. Any action taken before winter will only replace rather than add to this mortality.

Non-lethal methods such as fencing can be used to exclude rabbits from parts of the course and if properly maintained can be over 90% effective. Chemicals marketed as repellents are also available. They are sprayed onto the turf. Data on the effectiveness of these compounds is at present limited, although we are currently undertaking trials on one product. Finally, tree guards can be used to provide effective protection for individual trees.

### **BADGERS**

Badgers damage turf by digging holes when looking for food, such as insect grubs or worms, and this can occur

throughout the year. Badgers and their setts are, however, protected by legislation which makes it an offence to interfere with badgers or their setts without a licence. Therefore, preventing badgers causing damage is a complex problem which could not be adequately covered in this article. However, an extensive booklet for this purpose, called 'Problems with Badgers?', is available from the RSPCA (Causeway, Horsham, West Sussex RH12 1HG).

### **CANADA GEESE**

Canada geese cause damage to the grass particularly around ponds and lakes on a golf course by excessive grazing and trampling of the ground and they may make areas unplayable as a result of excessive fouling. Their droppings may also pose a potential health hazard if players eat, smoke or drink without washing their hands after handling golf balls which may have landed in the droppings. In addition, during the nesting period geese may become aggressive towards members (although some greenkeepers may not see this as a problem).



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## ● Altering the habitat by planting shrubs can deter Canada geese

Canada geese are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which requires that a licence must be obtained from the DoE or MAFF for certain types of management procedures and for any control carried out during the close season (February-August inclusive). These procedures include egg pricking, egg substitution and shooting during the close season or at night. However, the Act does not allow licences to be issued if the only purpose is to prevent damage to amenity land and therefore it is unlikely that one would be issued for management on golf courses.

Procedures not requiring a licence include fencing along the edge of ponds or lakes to deny easy access to adjoining grass. This may make an area less attractive to the birds and, consequently, may lead to a reduction in numbers or divert geese from greens to areas of rough where their grazing may be less damag-

ing. Also, altering the habitat, for example, by allowing the grass to grow or planting shrubs, can be undertaken to break up the open vistas preferred by geese along the water's edge and this may discourage them from using the area. Newly planted shrubs should, of course, be protected by fencing during establishment. Visual scarers can be used but, although they can be effective, they may be unacceptable on aesthetic grounds.

### MOLES

The most obvious damage which moles cause is the hills of soil produced as a result of digging their underground tunnel systems which can be several hundred metres long and can run at depths of up to 2m below the surface. Moles are managed by poisoning, by gassing and by trapping. Poisoning is carried out by placing worms treated with strychnine in mole runs.

However, the sale or supply of strychnine for general purposes is prohibited under the Pharmacy and Poisons Act 1933, except to those with written authority from MAFF to purchase it for the express purpose of killing moles. Written authority will be given only to those who have received training in the technique and further information on how to obtain training can be obtained from MAFF offices. Treated worms should be placed in deep rather than surface runs to prevent these worms becoming a hazard to other wildlife. Gassing is conducted mainly by placing tablets which generate phosphine gas into mole runs. Traps, which kill moles, should also be set in deep rather than surface runs and should not be set in mole hills. Control is best done between October and April when moles tend to be most active and their workings easily seen.

## Try a course on wildlife management

A course to provide greenkeepers with training in aspects of wildlife management is being provided by the Central Science Laboratory (CSL) starting this autumn in conjunction with BIGGA and the GTC. CSL is also able to provide consultancy advice to greenkeepers and further information on both these aspects can be obtained by writing to Gordon McKillop at the CSL, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Tangle Place, Worplesdon, Guildford, Surrey GU3 3LQ.



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