

# ARM YOURSELF FOR THE MOLE INVASION

Golf courses across the UK are preparing themselves for an explosion in the mole population by training staff in pest control techniques.



An increase in the number of moles can cause havoc on fairways as each one can tunnel up to 20 metres a day. The hills of earth they create are not only unsightly but they also create additional unwanted hazards for golfers. Molehills also cause problems for greenkeepers by damaging grass cutting machinery and disturbing plant growth.

Experts from the British Pest Control Association have said that a number of factors have caused the population surge. First there was the Foot and Mouth outbreak, which allowed the mole population to go unchecked for 12 months as pest controllers were prevented from treating infestations on agricultural land. Secondly we have seen warmer winters, which have increased the availability of the worms that make up a mole's diet. This increase in mole numbers has led many golf course managers to reassess how best to tackle the problem.





Knowing your enemy is the key to effective pest control.

"The mole spends most of its life underground and it will use its tunnel network to look for food such as insects, worms and slugs living in the soil. The tunnels run at a depth of about six inches underground and their length will depend on the abundance of food. Each network of tunnels will cover approximately 1,000 square metres," said Tony Stephens from Rentokil Pest Control.

"Moles are solitary creatures and are highly territorial. Each litter will contain three to four young and these will disperse during the mid-summer months to set up their own territories near by."

The traditional method for controlling moles has always been trapping. This may be effective for a single mole with a small network of tunnels.

"First you have to find the tunnels. You do this with a probe such as a metal rod. As you probe the ground between the molehills you should be able to feel less resistance when you locate a run. Ideally the more tunnels you locate the better, however the process can be very time consuming. Once you have located a number of potential trap sites you have to dig a small hole down to the depth of the tunnel. Be careful not to disturb the run too much as it may collapse. Once the trap is placed in

the hole it will need to be sealed to prevent the light coming in and this can be done with a piece of turf," explained Tony.

"The traps will need to be checked daily to see if they have been successful. Unfortunately traps can be set off by accident which can limit their hit rate. If the tunnel has been disturbed too much it has been known for moles to block up the run or tunnel around the trap.

"The setting of mole traps is said to be an art form and some have called it a country craft. It is not easy to get it right and it requires someone with experience and skill to use them effectively."

Other traditional methods of controlling moles include burying bottles up to their necks along the length of the run. When the wind blows across the top of the bottles the sound they make is meant to scare the mole away. However, pest control experts have dismissed this technique as being ineffective.

"The research and development team at Rentokil Pest Control have investigated the effectiveness of a number of methods that use sound to scare moles away. They rarely work and, if they do, they usually remain effective for a just a short period of time. Once the moles are used to the sound it no longer has the desired effect," said Tony.

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One of the simplest ways to control the pest is to ensure that they do not enter your land in the first place. This can be done by burying a strong wire fence in the ground up to the depth of a few feet. If you can extend this up to six foot deep it will also help keep out other burrowing animals such as rabbits and rats. However, this may be too costly or impractical for the majority of golf courses.

The most practical approach suggested by Tony was the use of Phostoxin (Active ingredient: Aluminium phosphide 56%w/w).

"This is a very popular technique and it is very effective too. Phostoxin is a specialist poison that gasses the moles in their tunnels. It comes in small tablets which when exposed to moisture in the air or soil, release the highly toxic gas Phosphine. It is potentially a very dangerous substance and must only be used by personnel trained in the use of this chemical," he said.

"To carry out a treatment with Phostoxin you would locate the mole tunnels in the same way as you would if you were trapping. However, rather than dig a hole that could disturb the tunnel, a special applicator is used which injects the tablets through the ground into the run. The area must then be kept clear of people and pets until the gas has dispersed."

The benefits of Phostoxin are well known and a growing number of golf courses are ensuring that their staff are trained to use it. One such course is Wychwood Park in Cheshire, which is owned and run by the conferencing company Initial Style. The Head Greenkeeper, Keith Ratcliffe, is currently preparing the course to host the PGA European Pro Tour in July.

"At the moment we have been lucky and we do not have a problem with moles. However they are on neighbouring land and I guess it is only a matter of time before we have to deal with them. That is the main reason why I sent one of my greenkeepers on a course to learn how to use Phostoxin. I want to be able to deal with the problem effectively and quickly as soon as it arrives," said Keith.

Courses on how to use Phostoxin are run by a number of organisations including agricultural colleges and the British Pest Control Association (Tel: 01332 294288/www.bpca.org.uk). The BPCA can organise two-day and three-day courses on how to deal with moles and rabbits. The courses teach participants all they need to know to on how to use Phostoxin safely without posing an unnecessary risk to humans or other animals. Always read the label - Use pesticides safely.



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