

The Chase Is Over

Moles succumb to new worm-mimicking bait — meaning mole hills like these could be a thing of the past



BY PETER BLAIS

If assistant superintendent Carl Spackler had been chasing moles in “Caddyshack,” he would’ve liked the new bait product from Bell Laboratories. It’s much more subtle in its control of the creepy critters than the high-powered ammunition Spackler would’ve used to battle them.

In fact, earthworm-shaped Talpirid Mole Bait, which Bell Labs recently introduced, may be the long-sought solution to ridding golf courses of the pesky tunneling insectivore.

“I can’t say enough good things about the product,” says Shadow Lake Golf Course Certified Superintendent Robert Donofrio, who reported previously trying every control measure from smoke bombs to sonic chasers to assorted

baits and repellents in his annual battles against the diminutive burrowing mammals that infested his Red Bank, N.J., executive nine-hole layout. “Right now, I don’t have a single mole on the course.”

“It really does work,” adds James Longhi, owner of Longhi’s Golf, an 18-hole, Southwick-Mass. facility.

Problem

Moles! The pesky critters tear up golf courses. How to stop them?

Solution

A company new to the industry has introduced a new product that could stop them once and for all.

“Moles are basically blind and hunt on smell and feel. Talpirid mimics both characteristics of earthworms. The tunneling should stop about the second day after you put out the bait.”

Talpirid is the result of several years of research by Bell Labs. The company assigned six researchers to the project in 2001, according to Director of Corporate Sales John Schwerin, whose company at that time had more than 30 years of experience in the professional pest control market, dealing primarily with rats and mice. “But moles have always been a problem,” Schwerin says.

The first difficulty was trapping the elusive creatures, which can tunnel up to 100 feet a day in search of food, and then keeping them alive.

“We did not understand initially that moles have a voracious appetite,” Schwerin said. “They can consume as much as 100 percent of their body weight of food in a single day. We realized that we had been starving the moles, which was one of the reasons they were dying in captivity. Once we discovered the extent of their appetite, we were able to keep them alive.”

The research team collected thousands of moles and studied their internal physiology, behavior and feeding patterns. Analysis of their stomach content showed almost 90 percent to consist of earthworms — not roots, vegetable matter or grains as many believed.

“They have a very unique way of consuming an earthworm,” Schwerin explains. “They get the orientation of the worm, identify the head by the ring around it, immobilize it by gnawing the head, then stretch the worm to get all the excrement out as they push their paws down and stretch it.”

Since worms were the moles’ primary foodstuff, Bell replicated a worm right down to the ring, with the same pliability and stretch-ability characteristics as an actual earthworm. The anti-coagulants Bell had traditionally used so successfully on rats and mice were largely ineffective in

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killing moles. Researchers eventually determined that bromethalin — an energy-metabolism antagonist that counters a mole's high-energy demands — killed moles within 24 hours.

"We started working with consultants and pest control companies to use the product in the field where there was mole activity," Schwerin says. "We were getting 100 percent success rates when the product was used according to our protocol, which consists of three visits. First, go out and identify a run to see if it is active by poking a hole in the run. If it is active, a mole will repair it within 24 hours to control its environment. Second, once we identify an active

run, we make bait placements inside the tunnel and mark them with lawn paint or flags. Finally, in two to three days, we return to the site to confirm that there is no new mole activity and stomp down the runs."

It's important to wear gloves when applying the bait.



Bell received Environmental Protection Agency approval in 2004 for Talpirid, which is named after a coupling of the classification term "Talpidae" for the mammalian family to which moles belong and that it will "rid" the pests from a site.

"What got us into the golf and lawncare businesses was that moles are active in both residential lawns and golf courses. They can tear up a tee box or finely manicured green," Schwerin says of the Madison, Wis.-based company's entrance into this new market. "Superintendents catch a lot of heat for not getting rid of moles."

Longhi said moles were tunneling extremely close to his greens and tees last fall and this spring. He used Talpirid according to directions and the moles were gone in 48 hours.

Donofrio laughs now at his past attempts to use smoke bombs, which always impressed the neighbors, or stabbing the ground with a pitchfork in an attempt to spear a burrowing mole.

Somewhere, Carl Spackler is smiling. ■

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