



MOLE HUNTING

By Monroe S. Miller

Aldo Leopold would have enjoyed this morning on our golf course. It would have delighted any naturalist, amateur or otherwise.

Within a short period of time, I watched the hawk who calls this course "home" hunting for gophers, heard (and subsequently found) a red-headed woodpecker in an old shag-bark hickory tree in the northwest woods, and chuckled while a squirrel and a blackbird argued high in an ancient red oak.

The wildlife living on this 100 acres right in the middle of the city give testimony to the great value of golf courses, value that goes way beyond the game and the players.

Seldom does a week go by that we don't see raccoons and woodchucks on the golf course. Muskrat live on the Lake Mendota shore near our pump station and have moved into the pond fronting the fifth green.

Graduate students from the university have come to our golf course to watch flocks of crows. All of us have respected the privacy of nesting mallards in the spring.

There have been many times I've watched golf players on our course stop traffic on Lake Mendota Drive so that a mother mallard could cross with her ducklings on the way to the lake and a swimming lesson.

From purple martin birds to praying mantis insects, from chipmunk families to wasp nests bigger than a basketball, a golf course provides habitat to wild-

life whose presence makes my daily life richer, fuller and more fun. Even the deer that occasion the course once or twice a year are welcome, despite the hoofprints that can result.

I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit, however, that one of God's creatures is not welcome here. My guess is I'd get agreement from every golf course superintendent in Wisconsin.

Moles and golf courses aren't compatible and I'd be thrilled if I never saw another molehill or tunnel. Or another mole for that matter.

Homeowners don't get along with moles very well, either. To be perfectly frank, I receive more calls for help from members about mole problems than lawn problems. They seem to think I'm a mole expert. I wish I was.

We have more than our fair share of moles, probably because of the wooded surrounds. But the problem I have now is nothing like the one that existed at the Nakoma Golf Club when I worked there as a college student.

That beautiful golf course is nearly surrounded by the University of Wisconsin arboretum; it's a tremendous asset. But when it comes to moles, it is (or was) a tremendous burden.

In the three years I spent at Nakoma, every single one of the scores of mole tunnels I saw originated in the arboretum. Sometimes it made us want to move.

The mole problem was kept well in check, however, by one of the best mole hunters you'd ever want to meet.

Erv Graf, Sr. was an expert.

I learned a lot of things from Erv while I was at Nakoma; things I use everyday in my job today. But the chance to learn mole hunting was a wasted opportunity. Despite many, many attempts, I just don't have it.

That's too bad, given the mole problem I have at my own course on occasion. Erv's method was sure fire, no miss. All the recommended procedures that I use, from removing the food source to outright trapping, usually don't work. I always hope the mole will just go away. Sometimes it does; sometimes it doesn't.

Most often, Erv did his mole hunting early in the morning when it was cool. Generally, it was quiet. When he'd spot fresh mole activity, usually in a moist, shaded area, he went into action.

First order of business was a sharpening of his primary weapon — a half-moon shaped sod knife.

He then returned to the site of the invasion. He quietly approached the tunnel; from a distance it looked like he was stalking game. In a way, I guess, he was.

Once he reached the crime scene he straddled the tunnel, about six feet back from the end of it. The battle had now begun.

It was a war of nerves. Who would be the first to move — the hunter or the hunted? Erv was absolutely motionless. You weren't easily able to tell if he was even breathing.

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He waited, sod knife poised about 30 inches above the tunnel, watching for the slightest sign of activity.

One thing you didn't do was disturb him. No talking, no walking, no machinery. We watched Erv as he watched the tunnel.

Suddenly, it happened. The sod knife fell in an instant, the metal of the sharpened edge flashing. If you were watching, invariably you jumped. There was no warning. It was not unlike seeing a guillotine in action.

Erv would open his pocket knife, cut the tunnel from the sod knife forward about a foot and peel it open. Almost always, there was the culprit.

How did he know when to drop the blade, effectively closing the gate on the tunnel? As soon as he saw the first sign of activity at the tunnel's end. Assuming it was safe, the mole resumed his burrowing and that's when Erv made his move. It was one less golf

course vandal to deal with.

Moles are small creatures, usually about six inches long. They have a pointed snout and seemingly no eyes or ears. Their most distinguishing feature, apart from their soft fur, is a pair of powerful digging paws.

Their paws can move 10 pounds of soil in less than half an hour. That's why they cause so much conflict on a golf course.

Their diet would make you consider more tolerance — they eat slugs, cutworms, grubs, insects and young mice. But they also eat earthworms. And earthworms are one of a golf course's greatest assets. I don't want any animal that could eat 30 or more pounds of earthworms in a year on the property.

At the turn of the century the hide of a mole was valuable in high fashion. Moleskins were used as trim for collars and cuffs. They were sold to make

pocket linings. If that market had been available in Erv's time, he'd have been a rich man.

Maybe we should consider ourselves lucky, lucky that usually there are less than half a dozen moles in an acre. And they hate each other, refusing to share the same ground. There's only so much damage a solitary mole can do.

One of our members recently, in all seriousness, suggested putting Juicy Fruit chewing gum in a small opening in a new tunnel. The theory of this method of mole control is that the mole will eat the gum, become constipated and die.

I think I'd better practice Erv's method of mole hunting. I have to believe that hunting is more humane than constipation!

And probably more effective.

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