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## **AGRIVIEW**

**By: Rick Hirsch  
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**Pocket gophers are burrowing rodents which live almost entirely underground.**

**Gophers are well adapted to their underground existence, with stout forelegs and strong curved claws for digging. They have prominent, yellow incisor teeth and large, fur-lined external cheek pouches in which food is carried. Pocket gophers have poor eyesight, but their other senses are acute. Their tails are sensitive and are used as feelers when the animals travel backward in their burrows.**

**Pocket gophers are rarely seen because they spend most of their lives in underground tunnel systems. Their presence in an area is indicated by the characteristic mounds they create. Pocket gophers should not be confused with moles, which are insectivorous and sometimes construct tunnels and mounds resembling those made by pocket gophers.**

**Gophers are solitary animals except during the mating season and when young are being cared for. Otherwise, there is only one gopher in each tunnel system. Pocket gophers dig extensive tunnels or runways that consist of a main tunnel with several short lateral tunnels. A single gopher may have a burrow system that extends as much as 800 feet, covers an acre of ground, and ranges from a few inches to several feet deep. Runways vary from 2 to 5 inches in diameter depending on the gopher species. These runways serve as**

homes, storehouses and routes for underground searches for food. The shallow runways, 4 to 15 inches below the surface, are used primarily to search for food. The gopher pushes soil from the burrows to the surface with its forefeet and chest, forming a characteristic horseshoe shaped mound approximately 8 to 24 inches in diameter and 6 inches high. The mounds are at the ends of short, lateral tunnels which branch off the main runway. The surface opening used to expel dirt from the burrow, is plugged by pushing dirt into it. This results in a depression on one side of the mound.

The pocket gopher's diet mainly consists of fleshy roots of various plants, including trees. Gophers normally eat tubers such as potatoes and peanuts. They also eat green tops and seeds that can be pulled down into their burrows.

Under natural conditions, gophers are beneficial to the soil. It is estimated that in a year, one gopher transports 2½ tons of soil to the ground surface. By bringing subsoil to the surface where it weathers more quickly, gophers contribute to the soil building process. The loosened soil makes the ground more fertile. Air and water can easily pass through porous soil to plant roots.

Gophers can cause serious damage, when they establish tunnel systems in cultivated farming areas, rangelands, orchards, tree farms and lawns. When there are many gophers they can damage field and pasture crops by eating the crops and by forming mounds which interfere with farm machinery. Gophers reduce the amount of livestock forage available on rangeland by harvesting and burying vegetation. They gnaw or clip the roots of trees, which may kill seedlings or small trees and reduce the vigor of large trees.

Pocket gophers in a lawn, garden or flower bed can destroy plants and produce

unsightly mounds. Gophers gnaw through underground plastic water pipes and electrical and communication cables and interfere with irrigation dikes. A tunnel system in a dam can cause it to erode and wash out. Tunnels under paved highways may cause the pavement to sink.

Control operations are recommended during the spring and fall when pocket gophers are most active near the surface. Their activity is usually indicated by the presence of fresh mounds of dirt. Control operations in the fall interfere the least with growing crops. Methods of control include mechanical and chemical means.

In small areas such as yards or gardens, or where there are only a few pocket gophers, trapping is usually satisfactory. Special traps have been designed to capture gophers. Several different types are available at hardware or farm and ranch supply stores.

Effective control materials for gophers are treated grain and zinc phosphide pellets. Toxic baits can be administered by the hand probe method or with a burrow builder. These methods are most efficient for large or heavily infested areas where trapping is not practical. Because the toxic grain is placed underground, it is relatively safe when used around other wildlife, pets and livestock. However, you should always carefully read and follow pesticide label instructions. Some of these products are classified as "restricted use" and require a certified pesticide applicators license.

#### LANDSCAPE PLANTS & COLD WEATHER:

Several cold spells have taken their toll on many ornamental landscape plants throughout Henderson County this winter and you can be sure that more are on the way. Concerned homeowners are asking what can be done to minimize damage and further

**protect valued plantings from cold damage.**

**It is often difficult to assess exactly how extensive winter damage is on a given plant.**

**Leaves may brown and darken only to leaf anew in the spring time. It is virtually impossible to determine the extent of damage until the growing season arrives. In general, if roots and stems escape severe damage, the plant will regenerate new leaves and survive.**

**Time is the true test for evaluation of plant damage. I would recommend that homeowners not prune or remove seemingly damaged plants until they have had a chance to respond under good weather conditions. Only then should damaged plants be severely pruned or removed.**

**In some cases, branch or stem damage may not occur until summer when heat stress may cause them to split and die. Pruning the plant just prior to spring growth will stimulate new growth and stronger recovery. A severe pruning may be necessary to remove all dead wood and to allow live root systems to sprout a new flush of growth. If the root system has been severely damaged there is little likelihood that the plant can be saved.**

**Cold damage is more prone to occur when excessive moisture is drawn from the plant tissue in freezing temperatures. Plants which are in dry soils consequently will suffer a greater degree of damage. Therefore, it is important to maintain adequate soil moisture even in the winter time. Mulching shallow rooted plants such as Azaleas with 4 - 6 inches of mulch will also help protect root systems.**

**One final tip on landscape plants - if you battled bagworms last year in your evergreens, now is a good time to inspect for, remove and destroy all of the remaining pouches. The eggs will overwinter in the bags left by the female and will be ready to start the cycle again this spring.**

**IMPORTANT DATES:**

- February 6<sup>th</sup>** - **East Texas Turfgrass Conference - Texas A&M AgriLife Research & Extension Center, Overton - 8:00 a.m. - \$30.00**
- February 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>** - **East Texas Beef Cattle Short Course - Corazon-Pitchford Sale Facility, Athens - 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.**

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