

January 22, 2015

AGRIVIEW

By: Rick Hirsch
County Extension Agent

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 include strychnine-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

IMPORTANT DATES:

February 5th - East Texas Turfgrass Conference - Overton - 7:30 a.m. -
\$30.00/person (payable at door) - 5 C. E. U.'s

*Rick Hirsch is the Henderson County Extension Agent - Agriculture for Texas
A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit our web page at <http://henderson.agrilife.org/>.*