

NOTES ON MOLE CONTROL

Mole Control

Introduction

Moles (*Talpa europaea*) are subterranean animals related to shrews. They tunnel below the soil surface feeding on worms and other soil invertebrates. Damage is done to grassland by the moles' habit of extruding the soil dug out of the tunnels into 'mole hills'. These are often considered unsightly in park areas and intolerable on sporting surfaces such as golf courses. More important, in agriculture, the soil from mole hills can lead to dangerous fermentation in silage.

Moles are solitary for most of the year coming together for copulation in the spring. The females tend their young for approximately five weeks before they and their offspring return to a solitary life.

Control Methods

Moles can be trapped, poisoned with bait, or gassed using aluminium phosphide tablets. Operations are best carried out between October and April when the grass growth is restricted allowing clear views and access to their tell-tale hills and the tunnels connecting them.

Before an operation commences it is advisable to flatten all visible mole hills. Then, after a day or two, the area of current mole activity can be isolated. Tunnels between hills can be located with a blunt stick or metal bar to probe the ground around the mole hill. When a tunnel is penetrated, the probe will drop quickly. The resulting hole can be used to position a trap, poisoned bait or aluminium phosphide tablet.

Trapping Mole catchers were a part of country life in Britain up to the middle of the 20th Century. Some specialised operators still remain but these usually use sophisticated cage traps and remove the mole alive, later releasing it in open country, away from areas where they can cause serious damage. More usual is the use of break-back barrel or scissor traps. These are placed in the mole tunnel and spring closed, killing the mole as it passes down its tunnel.

Great care is required setting mole traps, as moles are very sensitive to unusual odours. Gloves must be worn and traps must be buried in the soil before use to weather the metal. Like all traps mole traps should be checked daily. Scissor traps are usually preferable, as success or failure can be readily seen above ground, by the position of the trap handles.

Baiting The only approved oral poison for the destruction of moles is strychnine hydrochloride. This highly poisonous substance must be purchased from a pharmacist who will record the sale in a 'poisons book'. A permit to purchase strychnine must first be obtained from the local divisional office of MAFF.

Strychnine is applied to worms at the rate of two grams (gm) per 100 worms. Worms should be of similar size and cleaned of any soil. Reject very small and very large worms and do not use the banded red-brown worm (or brandlings), commonly found in manure heaps, as these are unpalatable to moles. Operators should allow 25 worms per hectare (10 worms per acre).

Apply the strychnine to the worms in a suitably marked container and stir to achieve an even distribution. Leave for twenty minutes and then use within 6 hours.

After locating the mole runs, drop worms into the run through the hole made by the locator, then block on the surface by heeling in the hole. Gloves must be worn and forceps used when handling the worms and all operations require the completion of a COSHH assessment.

The use of strychnine should be restricted to areas protected from public access, and great care must be taken to read the notes on its use supplied with the MAFF permit for its purchase.

Gassing Phosphine gas, released from aluminium phosphide tablets, can also be used for mole control. This substance is also extremely poisonous and similar precautions to those described for rodent control must be adhered to.