



LIVING WITH... MOLES

The European mole is one of Britain's most elusive mammals. Rarely seen, they spend most of their life underground, leaving only 'molehills' as a sign of their presence.

Moles live on average two to three years but have been known to live up to six. Deaths are caused mainly by persecution from humans, although cats, dogs, stoats and predatory birds will take moles when above ground and some are killed by traffic.

Typically between 13 and 16 cm in length, moles have short black-brown fur; large, clawed 'spade-like' front feet; a long, pointed, fleshy nose and very small eyes.

Mainly insectivores ('insect eaters') and active during day and night, moles will prey on a range of invertebrates and may take mice and shrews. The most important part of their diet is earthworms; an average mole will eat 60% of their bodyweight in earthworms every day. Earthworms are such an important part of the mole's diet that they store them in larders; special chambers where up to 370 worms have been found! The worms are immobilised with a bite to the back of the head so they remain fresh.

Moles spend their lives in extensive underground tunnel systems, often very deep. Where they live mainly depends on where food can be found. Moles are common in grassland, mixed or deciduous woodland, arable fields and gardens (even urban gardens). Moles will build both permanent and temporary tunnels in different circumstances. Permanent tunnels can be used by many generations of mole, are built deep underground and can stretch for hundreds of metres. Temporary tunnels are generally short-lived and found where their prey is concentrated near the surface.

Moles are both territorial and solitary, except during the mating season in spring, when males will extend their tunnel systems in the search for females. A female mole will give birth to between three to four pups; these will



stay with her for around five to six weeks before leaving to start their own independent lives.

Moles, or rather their tunnels and molehills, are sometimes considered a pest in the UK. Despite this reputation, moles do contribute to the quality and fertility of the soil by enabling the mixing of oxygen and water ('aeration'). They also prey on various insects harmful to agriculture and can contribute to pesticide-free farming.

Moles have been killed in large numbers for many years. At the beginning of the 20th century they were killed for their fur. Nowadays, they are still persecuted and killed as 'pests'.

Are moles blind?

Contrary to popular opinion moles are not blind, but they do have relatively poor vision. Their eyes, typically only 1mm in diameter, demonstrate how the mole has evolved to suit its subterranean existence. They are sensitive to changes in light levels and can detect when predators have broken into their tunnel systems. Moles rely greatly on their acute sense of smell when burrowing to detect prey, other moles or water sources.

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How can I deter moles from using my garden?

Moles themselves do no direct harm, although evidence of their presence (the molehills) may be unsightly and their tunnels may affect some plants in the garden. If you have moles in your garden, removing or flattening the molehills will solve any unsightly problems. Frequent lawn mowing, children playing and other noisy activity can help to deter them.

There are many popular methods that allegedly deter moles, but there is no scientific evidence for their effectiveness. They include:

- milk bottles
- vibrating probes
- toy windmills
- 'repellent' plants



What laws relate to moles?

Moles are have only basic protection from cruelty under the **Wild Mammals Protection Act 1996** and, when trapped or caught, the **Animal Welfare Act 2006**. Only legally approved poisons can be used by trained and licensed operators. You can legally release an uninjured mole back into the wild, but be careful to put it back where it came from.

I am concerned moles have been illegally poisoned, what should I do?

Before 2006, the poison strychnine hydrochloride was one of the main methods of killing moles, but using it is now an offence in the UK and has been replaced by aluminium phosphide.

Legislation covering the use, supply, storage and advertisement of pesticides requires that users take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of human beings, non-target animals, and to safeguard the environment. **Only approved products can be used and they must be used by trained and licensed professionals, in accordance with label instructions and current legislation.**

If you have specific evidence that this legislation is being broken, you should contact **Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme** on **0800 321 600**.



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Are mole traps humane?

Guidelines published by the **Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW)** lays out and assess in detail the pros and cons of live versus lethal traps. The RSPCA has also researched into humane mole control.

Although the use of live catch traps may appeal to those wishing to avoid killing, there is no scientific data to indicate they are humane. Research has concluded that 'tube traps', a commonly sold form of mole trap, should actually be taken off the market as they severely compromise welfare.

All live catch traps can have significantly negative effect on the animal's welfare; being confined in a live catch trap can cause an enormous amount of distress to the animal involved and it is not unusual for the animal to have died by the time the trap is checked. Moles are also territorial and so introducing one that has been captured to a new area is fraught with problems; Natural England also advise against the relocation of moles of welfare grounds.



High quality, conventional scissors traps are commonly used but **the RSPCA does not recommend the use of such traps** as there is a risk the trap will not kill the mole outright and may cause prolonged suffering. **Under the Spring Traps (Approval) Order 2012**, anyone using traps must take precautions in preventing the traps causing injury or death to any species other than the one it was intended for.

I have found a mole above ground, what should I do?

Despite living underground for most of their lives, moles will occasionally come to the surface, usually at night. If a mole is seen out during night time it may just be that it is looking for food or nesting material. If it is around late summer, it may also be a juvenile leaving its mother's territory; this occurs when the young are five to six weeks old. **If you see a mole out above ground and it does not appear to be injured or sick, it should be left alone and any pets kept well away.**

If a mole is seen out during the day and appears to have been dug out of its tunnels (e.g. by a dog), try and see if it is injured. If handling becomes necessary, always wear thick gloves and wash hands carefully afterwards. If it appears healthy, it is best to return it to the burrow system it was taken from. Moles are territorial and releasing it into an already occupied territory – or an unoccupied but less ideal territory – could have severe consequences.

Many moles are mistaken for orphans when in fact they are young dispersing moles (usually June-August) or even adults. If the mole is uninjured with fur and open eyes leave it alone.

If you find a hairless, pink or blue-grey mole with closed eyes please call the number below as it will need immediate care.

To report an injured or sick mole to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on 0300 1234 999