

## A Vole by Any Other Name

By Susan Camp

“Do you remember that cute, little field mouse that climbed into your empty coffee mug several years ago while you were sitting on the front steps?” I reminded my husband that he and the field mouse had had a nice chat before my husband carried him in the mug to the edge of the woods and let him go. “Well, guess what? That cute field mouse with the soft fur and beady, black eyes was a vole!” That’s right, field mouse and vole are two names for the same critter. The term meadow mouse is sometimes used, as well. While field mouse makes us think of a Beatrix Potter character, the term vole conjures up a darker image of a sharp-toothed monster devouring the tender roots of our tulips and hostas.

The topic of vole/field mouse arose when a neighbor brought me two rose bushes stripped of roots and looking oddly top heavy. I promised to research some articles and follow up with him in the next few days. According to an article on the Virginia Fish and Wildlife Service website , the vole most commonly found on the Middle Peninsula is the pine vole (*Microtus pinetorum scalapsoides*), although there are several other species in Virginia. The pine vole has thick reddish-brown fur and a slender, rounded body. Its length ranges from 4 to 5 ¾ inches and it weighs between ¾ to 2 ounces. Pine voles prefers habitat with thick vegetation or woodland litter that provides heavy cover. Burrows are shallow and connected by surface runs. A nest may contain several adults and offspring. Breeding peaks in July, although females breed throughout the year, producing up to four litters of three to four young. Unlike moles, which eat grubs and insects, voles eat herbaceous flowering plants, seeds, and grasses. In fall and winter, they will consume roots and bark, particularly of young trees, often causing significant damage. They are active day and night, throughout the year. Voles cannot climb trees and spend most of their lives underground. They may use old mole runs to reach plants.

There is no perfect system for eradicating voles, although there are home remedies and vole repellents on the market, most of which produce sketchy results. A cost effective, practical method to limit vole damage is to clear vegetation and leaf litter away from plantings, field edges, and ditch banks. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 420-201 recommends selective planting and limiting mulch around trees to a depth of no more than 1 inch.

Dr. Jim Parkhurst, Virginia Tech wildlife biologist, suggested in a 2014 Turf and Garden Tips Podcast “Moles and Voles” that gardeners refer to the University of California Integrated Pest Management Program publication “Pests in Gardens and Landscapes: Voles (Meadow Mice)” for information on decreasing their numbers in gardens and orchards. Wire fences with mesh ¼ inch or smaller placed 6 to 10 inches below ground and extending 12 inches above ground may help to exclude voles from young trees and new plantings. According to the article, electromagnetic and ultrasonic devices are ineffective, as is fumigation with gas cartridges,

because vole burrows are shallow. Natural predators of voles include hawks, owls, foxes, and snakes. The most effective method of eradicating voles seems to be the mousetrap, baited with apple slices or a peanut butter and oatmeal mixture. Many mousetraps will be necessary for even a small garden. Dead voles should be handled with rubber gloves and buried or placed in a plastic bag in the trash.

In Virginia, the vole is classified as a non-game protected species, except for the endangered rock vole. Pine voles can be taken if they are causing damage to property or exist in numbers that present a health hazard. Under Virginia law, it is illegal to set a trap where it could injure humans or domestic animals. Each trap must be checked and cleared once a day. It is also illegal to poison animals, except rats and mice (excluding voles). Voles cannot be relocated to another property, so forget about transporting your pests to your neighbor's field.

Vole eradication is not an exact science. The best you can hope for is to decrease their numbers to the point that plant damage remains minimal.

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