

A very strange Request, by Cindy Bruecks

We get all sort of queries on our Hotline, everything from why is my tree dying to how do I plant a steep hillside? One of the most intriguing recently was from a man who had what I'll call "tracks" in his lawn. They were not like gopher tracks, which really consist of an occasional mound of freshly-dug earth with tunnels in between. No, these were more like tracks of dead lawn threading across the lawn. See photos, taken by the client, PK Richter, and reproduced here with his permission.

I suspected either a gopher or a vole, which is related, but somewhat smaller and with a shorter tail. Voles were on my mind because one of my own neighbors has been beset with a huge number of them. She goes out to her enclosed garden to harvest something for dinner and if she's not careful, will literally step on some of them in the darkness. Of course we've been taught not to live by our own experience, but to consult science instead, so I did but came up empty-handed. Nobody, it seems, has observed tracks like those before. In desperation I googled it! "sinuous trails in my lawn" or some such. Sure enough, a commercial pesticide applicator pointed out that voles tend to burrow very near the surface, leaving surface trails of their passage. And indeed, that is what it looked like, as if some small creature had burrowed about one inch below the surface, probably lunching on grass roots as it went and meandering over the lawn in a shameful display of domination.





Voles have other habits, too, which differentiate them from gophers. Voles are apt to store “things” in a “storeroom”, usually food items stashed in an unused part of the burrow. I advised the homeowner to dig around and see if he could locate any “stash-rooms”, or any trails which we suspected came from the wildland just over his property line. He fully understood the problem was firmly lodged in the wildland and nothing he was going to do would eradicate the population of intruders living happily in the unkempt outback. They only occasionally ventured onto his property, probably for water or a meal of well-irrigated plant roots.

See the pest note for voles here:

<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/home-and-landscape/voles/pest-notes/#gsc.tab=0>

The client did as I suggested, and dug around to try to follow the trails. No stash-rooms were found nor extensive burrow systems. It seemed the rodents had done their destructive work and moved on to terrorize some other neighbor. I also suggested a barn owl box as a part of the solution. Barn owls hunt silently, by sound, so they don’t screech at night the way some other owls do. They do make noises when communicating with other owls, but in general a barn owl is not a bad neighbor, provided it does not choose a mate and have a clutch of baby barn owls, in which case they make quite a racket until the “kids” have fledged. UC IPM has this to say about barn owl patrol:

“Some people have tried attracting barn owls to an area by installing nest boxes. Although barn owls prey on gophers, their habit of hunting over large areas, often far from their nest boxes, and their tendency to hunt areas with abundant prey, make them unreliable for gopher control. When a single gopher, which is capable of causing damage rapidly, invades a yard or garden, a gardener can’t afford to wait for an owl to arrive. It is better to immediately take effective action, usually through trapping or baiting.”

In other words, a barn owl may eat a few of your invaders, but is mostly interested in hunting where the hunting field is full of options. The literature seems to put barn owl diet in the range of one rat per day, or three voles per day per owl. So a nesting pair can clean up your yard pretty well, unless they decide the grass is greener elsewhere. Of course, if you decide to put up a barn owl box, you should be fastidious about not keeping poison on the property in any form. The carcass of a poisoned rodent still contains the original rodenticide, It does not get “used up” in the digestive process, but, rather like pharmaceuticals, it endures through digestion and even elimination. I describe it as “it moves around, is doesn’t go away.” Hence the need for careful attention to its introduction. Pesticides/poisons never stay where you put them, so be aware. Best practice is to shun the chemicals in favor of mechanical means, which in this case can be very effective.