

# Invisible Bites and Itches

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After temperatures become cold enough for the furnace to kick on, we start hearing more folks complaining about itches and bites from unknown "bugs." These itches and bites are real enough for some clients to bring samples into our office for identification.

With the exception of a few different mites, all the arthropods that bite humans can be easily seen with the naked eye and identified. This includes lice, fleas, bedbugs, and spiders.

Even though the itches and biting sensations are real to the people who contact us, sometimes we cannot identify the cause of the discomfort and will refer clients to other professionals who can help them solve their problem.

One invisible mite is the scabies mite. Scabies are usually found in the area of the body where the skin is very thin, like the hands and wrists. Scabies burrow under the skin and cause excruciating itching. Because the elderly and young children have thin skin, scabies are often more of a problem with these groups of people. However, the extension office does not have the diagnostic tools to diagnose scabies. Clients who believe they

have scabies should see their physician or a dermatologist who can determine if they have scabies and can prescribe medication.

There are tiny mites that feed on small animals or birds and sometimes bite people even though humans are not their preferred host. If the mites are infesting a cat, for example, the pet owner or other family members may get bitten when the cat sits on their lap or when they share furniture. A veterinarian can diagnose if a pet has mites and prescribe medication to eliminate the infestation. Roosting birds, like pigeons, can also carry mites that can bite people. The logical method of control is to remove the roosting birds.

If neither of these scenarios are a possibility, it is possible there is an allergy to an environmental situation, food, medication, cosmetic, cleansing product, or pet hair/dander. The cause can be very hard to identify unless the client enlists the help of an allergist who may be able to help pinpoint the cause of itching.

Dry skin should not be discounted. Because we see an increase in the number of these cases during the fall of the year, we suspect static electricity and dry skin may be a contributing factor.

Sometimes folks complicate their problem by using substances to solve what they perceive as a "bug" problem, but which result in an allergy problem. We have heard of people saturating their skin with pesticides, alcohol, bleach, disinfectant, skin creams, ointments, and other home remedies. These substances can make an allergy or skin inflammation worse.

There is still another possibility. We occasionally see people who claim they are being bitten, but no insect is ever found. It is difficult to help them because they are steadfastly convinced they are being bitten by an insect and cannot be convinced otherwise. Severely disturbed people, suffering from delusory parasitosis, actually can "see" and describe the offending parasites in great detail. Dry skin may play a part in triggering this condition because complaints seem to be more frequent during the winter months. Counseling with a mental health professional might be helpful in these cases.

We can identify most of your insect problems. If not, we can probably point you in the right direction to get help. Bring samples to the Lancaster County Extension office, 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., weekdays, or call 402-441-7180.

## Voracious Voles

What do chain saws, beavers, and voles have in common? They all can damage trees. With fall and winter are quickly approaching, questions about voles increase.

Voles are small, chunky rodents with short tails, blunt noses, and bead-like eyes. Voles damage trees by gnawing the

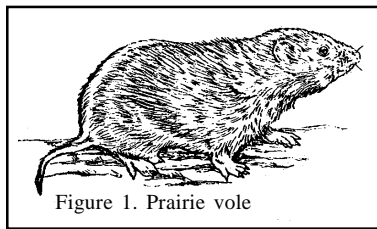


Figure 1. Prairie vole

bark near ground level. Some species of voles can weaken trees and other plants by gnawing on their roots.

Voles often are confused with moles or shrews. It is important to know what animal you are dealing with because control methods vary depending on the animal.

Shrews eat insects—some even eat voles. They should be left alone in the garden or lawn.

Moles are often blamed for the damage done to yards and plants by voles. Moles eat grubs, earthworms, and other insects—they rarely feed on plants. You can distinguish a mole from a vole just by looking at its paws. Moles have large, wide front paws designed for digging. Moles have pointy snouts and look like they don't have eyes or ears. Voles have little paws and you can see their beady black

eyes.

### Identifying Vole Signs

**Teethmarks:** Vole marks are very tiny and irregular, occurring in various angles and in random patches (see figure

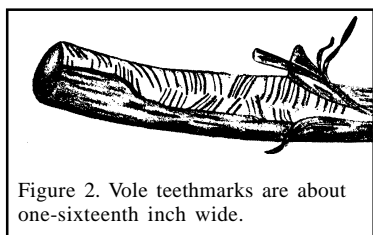


Figure 2. Vole teethmarks are about one-sixteenth inch wide.

2). While teethmarks from rabbits are larger and more uniform.

**Tunneling:** Some voles make "clipped paths" through grass lawns and tunnel just under the surface of mulched areas (see figure 3). Voles do not hibernate in the winter so they can reach their food sources by tunneling through the snow.

**Disappearing plants:** If the bulbs you planted this fall don't come up next year, or your other

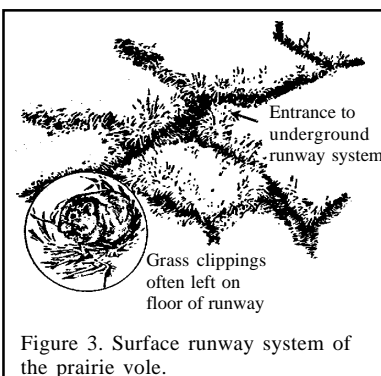


Figure 3. Surface runway system of the prairie vole.

plants begin to disappear, you could have a problem with

voles.

### Controlling Voles

**Trapping:** Set mouse traps near holes or in their clipped paths. Bait the traps with peanut butter mixed with oatmeal. If you want, cover the traps with a small box or flower pot, making sure the traps can still close. This will keep non-target animals from getting into the trap. I'm reminded of the gentleman who called, very distressed, to know the trap he intending to catch voles with caught a male cardinal instead.

**Exclusion:** Fencing is a practical method of protecting trees, shrubs, and other plants. Fencing should be buried

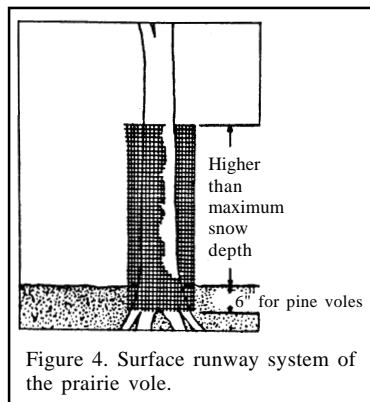


Figure 4. Surface runway system of the prairie vole.

slightly in the ground and extend higher than the maximum snow depth. If you are also having problems with rabbits, the fence should extend another two feet above the snow.

**Toxicants:** In severe cases, toxicants may have to be used to control voles. These products may be available at lawn and

## Environmental Focus



## America Recycles Day

Wednesday,  
November 15, 2000

Recycling is everyone's business. From industry to government, from schools to our very own households. America's commitment to recycling has helped keep our communities clean and our economy strong. Working together, there is even more we can do. By bringing new partners to the recycling efforts of businesses and families across the nation, we will better protect our natural resources, improve our quality of life, and strengthen our economy.

The theme for the fourth annual America Recycles Day is "For Our Children's Future...Buy Recycled Today." Maybe you're already putting plastic bottles in your recycling bin. But did you know you may be wearing them or walking on them?

Some t-shirts are made from EcoSpun, a fiber made completely from recycled plastic soda bottles. Recycled milk bottles, tires, diapers, cardboard, soda bottles, and more are used to make shoes. Some writing papers are made from recycled blue jeans or old money.

So, celebrate America Recycles Day all year round by closing the loop and buying recycled products. Look for the reduce, reuse, and recycle label and the percentage of recycled materials used in each item you purchase. It will surprise you more manufacturers are using recycled materials. (ALH)

## Bugs in Your Firewood?

Several kinds of insects may be found in firewood, but only rarely would any cause an infestation in furniture or your house structure. Some insects found in firewood are carpenter ants, wood-boring beetles, wood roaches, silverfish, and other insects that pass the winter in sheltered locations under bark. Termites are never found in firewood stored outside when temperatures are below freezing. Termites generally overwinter deep in the soil below the frost line.

Carpenter ants nest in wood that has gotten wet and started to decay. Firewood that has been stored for several years may house a carpenter ants nest. It is best to inspect your wood carefully before bringing it into the house. Decaying wood makes poor firewood.

Wood-boring beetles leaving firewood are also unlikely to infest your home. Many species of wood-boring beetles may infest wood, and they range from 1 1/2 inches to 1/8 inch long. Often these beetles (or their larval stage) leave the wood after it is cut; some may die as the wood starts to dry out.

If insects start to emerge from your firewood, do not panic! Get out the vacuum cleaner and sweep 'em up. Insecticide treatment of firewood is definitely not recommended because dangerous fumes may arise when you burn the wood. The best way to eliminate a potential insect problem is to keep the firewood outside until you get ready to burn it. And, only store or buy enough wood for one season's use. (BPO)

garden centers. All toxicants used to control voles can be hazardous to humans, pets, livestock, and non-target wildlife, if used improperly. Only use products registered for voles. Make sure you read the label and follow the label directions. Source: Controlling Vole Damage (G887) and

Moles, Voles, and Shrews (Penn State University).

For more detailed information on controlling voles, moles, or to get additional information on shrews, contact the extension office at 441-7180. (SC)