



## **Voles, aka field mice could be a problem**

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Several years ago I planted some replacement apple trees and failed to put tree guards on them. We had enough snow to cover the bottom part of the trees. Come spring and when the snow melted, I discovered that all the new trees had been girdled. And though they formed buds, they all died that spring. I thought the bark had been eaten by mice and to some extent that's true because Voles are also called meadow mice or field mice.

Voles do not hibernate but spend the winter building snow tunnels that protect them from fluctuating temperatures. It is usually several degrees warmer in these tunnels. Their tunnels have room for storing food and rooms for sleeping. The girdling damage they do usually occurs in fall and winter. However, the telltale signs of gnaw marks don't necessarily mean vole damage as other animals can make similar marks. Vole gnaw marks are not uniform and they occur at various angles and in irregular patches. Rabbit gnaw marks are larger and not distinct and they neatly clip branches with clean cuts.

Voles can do plenty of damage to summer crops such as alfalfa, clover, grain, potatoes and sugar beets. Their tunnels and runways interfere with crop irrigation and they can ruin lawns, golf courses and ground covers. You may see runways of chewed grass in your lawn in the spring and this is the eating path of the voles. Luckily they only consume the top part of the plant leaving the roots alone so the grass plant won't die.

That mouse you saw in your house could have been a vole. Although they rarely come into the house, using a snap trap or live trap baited with a peanut butter oatmeal mixture can control them. Though they pose no major health hazard, it's best to wear protective clothing while handling them.

To control them outdoors, keeping the grass and weeds down in the orchard and garden can help. Hardware cloth cylinders keep them away from young trees and seedlings. Placing mulch around perennials for weed control and winter protection can also invite voles who seek out a warm home. Enemies of voles include coyotes, snakes, hawks, owls and weasels but even those predators aren't enough to prevent the damage voles can do.