

The Mole (*Talpa europaea*)



'I am a Mole and I live in a hole...'

The immortal line from the Southlanders classic 1958 novelty song sums up most people's knowledge of mole ecology. An animal universally known by the evidence it leaves behind, how much do you really know about moles?

Historically moles probably benefited as a species from our wholesale drainage of lowland Britain. Much of the land would simply have been too wet for them. Still widespread and common throughout Britain, the mole is absent from Ireland and most islands.

The mole can be found in nearly all habitats where the soil is deep enough to allow tunnelling. It has an elongated, cylindrical body, covered in black velvety fur. Although the eyes are complete, they are tiny, and often hidden by fur. There are no external ears and the nose is naked, apart from sensitive whiskers. The large, spade-like forepaws are well adapted for digging, with five robust claws in a permanently out-turned position. The sexes are similar in appearance, typically 113–159mm in body length with tails 25–40mm and a weight range of 72–128g. Males are usually larger than females.

Moles, like humans, are highly territorial, generally live alone and are property-obsessed, although only a few diehard hobbit fans would want to live in an extensive system of permanent and semi-permanent tunnels. Surface tunnels are typically short-lived and occur in areas of light sandy soils, very shallow soils (where prey is concentrated near to the surface) or newly cultivated fields. More usual is a system of permanent, deep burrows, which form a complex network hundreds of metres long at varying depths. The deepest tunnels are used in times of drought and low temperatures. Permanent tunnels are used repeatedly for feeding over long periods of time, sometimes by several generations of moles (no inheritance tax).

Moles have voracious appetites: an 80g mole needs 50g of earthworms a day. Their extensive tunnels provide a drop-in larder of earthworms, leather jackets, beetle grubs and other invertebrates. Sometimes earthworms are cached alive in a special chamber, having first been immobilised with a bite to the head.

Moles typically don't live beyond three years. Their main predators are humans, in the form of mole control, our pets (cats and dogs) and natural predators, which include buzzards, stoats and tawny owls.

Males and females are solitary for most of the year but at the start of the breeding season males enlarge their tunnel systems in search of females. If the quest is successful, a litter of three or four naked babies is born in the spring. Fur begins to grow at 14 days, eyes to open at 22 days and they are weaned at four to five weeks. Juvenile moles typically disperse from their mother's home range at five to six weeks. Dispersal takes place above ground, when you are most likely to see them and they are at their most vulnerable.

Moles are not universally popular although their tunnels help drain and aerate heavy soils and many dedicated gardeners use the soil from mole hills mixed with potting compost for a growing medium. For those still keen to deter moles, the facts can be found via the link below. It will also dispel urban myths.
<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/wildlife/species/moles.aspx>

JW