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Managing pocket gophers in Colorado

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Quick Facts

Four species of pocket gophers are found in Colorado.

Pocket gophers reduce the productivity of those portions of alfalfa fields and native grasslands on which they are found by 20 to 50 percent.

Damage by pocket gophers can be reduced by exclusion, weed control, trapping and use of toxicants applied by hand or with a burrow builder.

Pocket gophers are medium sized (7 to 13 inches long and 3 to 14 ounces), burrowing rodents that spend most of their lives below ground. They are named after the paired fur-lined cheek pouches located on the outside of the mouth. The pockets are used to carry food. Gophers have powerfully built forequarters with large claws on their front feet, a short neck, external ears, small eyes, and lips that close behind their large incisors. The vibrissae (whiskers) on their face and the sparse hairs on the tail serve as sensory mechanisms, guiding the gophers either forward or backward through their underground burrows.

Four species of pocket gophers are found in Colorado. The four species are distributed in almost entirely different areas (Figure 1), possibly because of different ecological requirements or competition. Plains pocket gophers (*Geomys bursarius*) are abundant in sandy and silty soils of the plains, but are not abundant in compacted soils. The northern pocket gopher (*Thomomys talpoides*) occurs in deep, sandy soils of the plains to shallow gravel in mountainous areas. It is the most common species in mountain rangelands and forests. The valley pocket gopher (*Thomo-*

mys bottae) is found primarily in well-developed soils of warm valleys in the southern part of Colorado. The yellow-faced pocket gopher (*Pappogeomys castanops*) inhabits a portion of the area, in southeastern Colorado, where the plains pocket gopher is found. However, the yellow-faced pocket gopher is confined to drier sites or sites with soils that are less favorable for the plains pocket gopher. Pocket gophers attain the highest densities on light-textured soils with good herbage production. Shallow soils limit pocket gophers due to tunnel cave-ins and poor insulation from warm summer and cold winter temperatures.

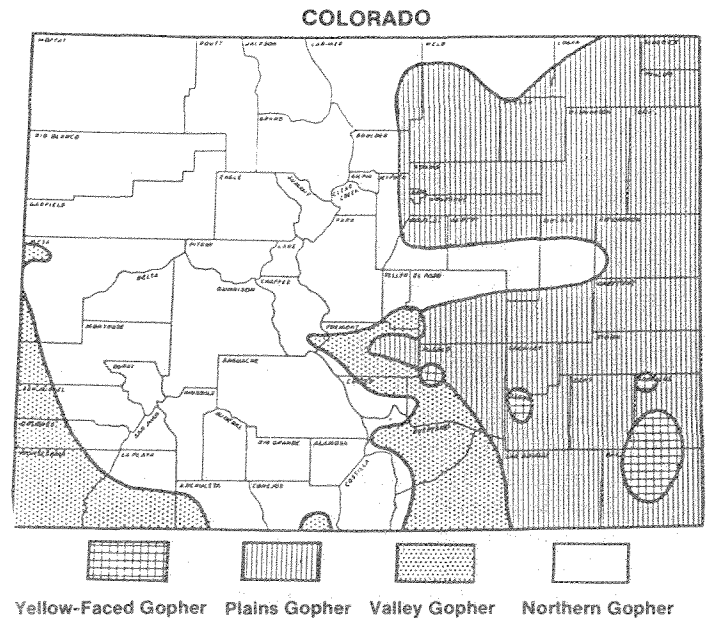


Figure 1: The approximate distribution of the four species of pocket gophers in Colorado.

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Distinguishing among the four species of pocket gophers in Colorado is moderately easy. The northern and valley pocket gophers have smooth upper incisors with a single indistinct groove near the inner border and have smaller bodies and proportionately smaller front feet than the plains and yellow-faced pocket gophers. The northern pocket gopher is usually dark-colored with a whitish chin and belly whereas the valley pocket gopher is often reddish-brown with a blackish chin and reddish belly. These two species are often difficult to tell apart. The plains pocket gopher has two distinct grooves on the front surface of each upper incisor whereas the yellow-faced pocket gopher has one distinct groove.

Food Habits

Pocket gophers feed on roots encountered while digging, on vegetation pulled into the tunnel from below, and on above ground vegetation near the tunnel. Pocket gophers prefer above ground portions of vegetation when it is green and succulent. Pocket gophers prefer succulent forbs in spring and summer but also feed on grasses. Alfalfa is preferred by gophers. Many trees and shrubs are clipped just above ground, especially under snow cover.

Biology, Reproduction and Behavior

Pocket gophers construct burrow systems by loosening the soil with their claws and incisors. Gophers then use their forefeet and chest to push the soil out of the burrow. The soil is deposited in fan-shaped mounds 12 to 18 inches wide and 4 to 6 inches high.

Burrow systems consist of a main tunnel generally 4 to 18 inches below the soil surface and a variable number of lateral burrows extending from the main. Lateral burrows end with a soil mound or only a soil plug at the surface. Burrows are about 2 to 3½ inches in diameter, depending on the size of the gopher. A burrow system may be linear to highly branched, may contain up to 200 yards of tunnels, and may have a hundred or more mounds.

Pocket gophers usually construct one to three mounds per day although the rate is variable. This mound building by one gopher brings about 1¼ to 2¼ tons of soil to the surface each year. Mound building activity is usually greatest in spring and fall.

Pocket gophers usually breed in the spring and produce one litter of three to six young after a gestation period of about 20 days. Usually, only one adult is found in each burrow system except during breeding and while raising young. Six to eight plains pocket gophers per acre are considered high densities whereas northern pocket gophers occasionally reach densities of 20 per acre. Young pocket gophers usually begin dispersing from the natal burrow in June, when about half grown.

Pocket gophers are consumed by several predators including owls, hawks, badgers, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, skunks, weasels, bullsnakes and rattlesnakes.

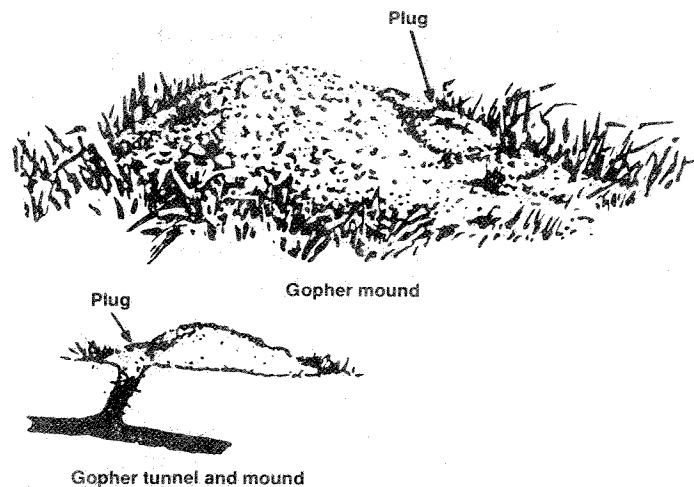


Figure 2: Pocket gopher mound and its relation to tunnel system.

Economic Damage

Pocket gophers reduce the productivity of those portions of alfalfa fields and native grasslands on which they are found by 20 to 50 percent. If gophers are present on 10 percent of a field, they may reduce overall forage productivity of the field by 2 to 5 percent. Gopher mounds dull and plug sickle bars when harvesting hay or alfalfa. Gophers sometimes damage trees by girdling or clipping stems and by pruning roots. Gophers may, at times, destroy underground utility cables and irrigation pipes.

In retrospect, gophers are beneficial in several ways. Their burrowing activities increase soil fertility by adding organic matter in the form of plant materials and feces. Their burrowing increases soil aeration, increases water infiltration, reduces compaction, and increases the rate of soil formation by bringing up subsoil subjecting it to weatherization.

Control Methods

Gophers are not protected by state or federal laws. When selecting a damage control program, consider nonlethal measures such as habitat modification or appropriate alfalfa varieties, which may be as cost effective as lethal measures and should minimize adverse environmental impacts. It is important to maintain biodiversity, or to retain the existing plants and animals that may later benefit humans and assist in maintaining ecosystem function.

Pocket gophers can be excluded from valuable plots of ornamental trees and shrubs with a ¼ to ½-inch mesh hardware cloth fence buried at least 18 inches. In shallow soil the fence should be placed at least 2 feet from the nearest plants to avoid root injury. This method is of limited practicality because of expense and labor. Cylindrical plastic Vexar mesh tubes placed over the entire seedling, including bare root, can significantly reduce damage to newly planted seedlings.

Alfalfa Varieties

Varieties of alfalfa with several large roots rather than a single tap root suffer less when

pocket gophers feed on them, and they are more resistant to grazing by grasshoppers. Each cut section of roots from a multi-rooted variety will send up a new shoot that may more than compensate for production losses due to gophers.

Crop Rotation

Rotating alfalfa with grain crops effectively controls pocket gophers because annual grains do not produce large enough roots to support gophers year round.

Buffer strips of grain around a hay field provide unsuitable habitat and can minimize immigration of pocket gophers.

Control of broad-leaf forbs, which frequently have large underground storage structures preferred by gophers, with 2, 4- D herbicide treatments can effectively control northern and valley pocket gophers and minimize damage to rangelands. This method is less effective for plains pocket gophers because they easily survive on grasses. In orchards and shelterbelts, control of forbs likely will effectively limit gopher damage.

Flood irrigation can effectively control pocket gophers especially in fields that have been leveled to remove high spots that might serve as refuges. The wet flooded soil generally prevents diffusion of gases in and out of the burrow and sticks to the pocket gopher's fur and claws creating an inhospitable environment.

Trapping is one of the best methods for reducing pocket gopher numbers on small to moderate-sized fields (less than 50 acres) and to remove remaining animals after a poison control program. Body-gripping traps (Death Clutch 1, Macabee, Victor, Guardian Gopher Trap), available from hardware and trapping supply stores, work exceptionally well for capturing gophers. Traps can be set in the main tunnel or in a lateral, preferably near the freshest mounds. The lateral tunnel usually can be located by a circular plug (sometimes a depression) in the fan-shaped mound (Figure 2). Probe into the depression, usually in the direction away from the mound, until the direction of the tunnel is determined. Remove the several-inch plug of soil with a garden trowel or a spade. A trap, secured to a wire and marker stake, can be inserted with the body gripping jaws about 6 to 8 inches into the tunnel (Figure 3). Traps also can be set in the main tunnel located about 12 to 18 inches from the mound. After uncovering the main tunnel with a shovel, set two traps as shown in Figure 3. The tunnels either can be left open or covered after setting traps. Traps can be checked twice daily since gophers often visit the traps within a few hours. If a trap is not visited within 48 hours, move it to a new location. Trapping usually is most successful in the spring and fall when gophers are actively building mounds.

Four rodenticides, strychnine (0.31 to 0.5 percent active ingredient) zinc phosphide (2 percent active ingredient), chlorophacinone (Rozol) (0.005 percent active ingredient) and diphacinone (Eaton's Answer) (0.005 percent active ingredient) are registered for pocket gopher control in Colorado. Strychnine, formulated on milo, barley or wheat, is a widely used toxicant. Because strychnine is

highly toxic and potentially hazardous to all wildlife, it is usually labeled as a Restricted Use Pesticide. Underground baiting with strychnine presents minimal hazards to non-target wildlife but any grain spilled on the surface may be hazardous to ground-feeding birds. In some studies, zinc phosphide has been less effective than strychnine. Diphacinone (Eaton's Answer) is blended with a water resistant material and is formulated in bait blocks. The blocks provide long term control because the bait remains effective after killing resident gophers so that invading gophers are also eliminated. Since chlorophacinone (Rozol) is a multiple dose anticoagulant, a greater amount of bait is required to achieve adequate control. To poison pocket gophers, the bait must be placed in their tunnel systems by hand or with a burrow builder machine.

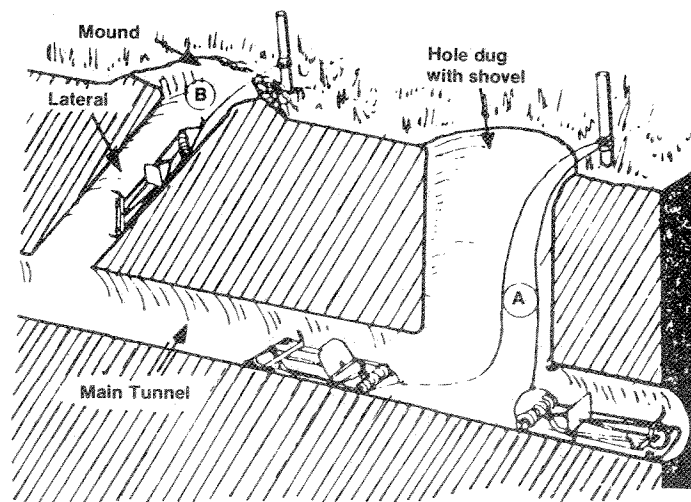


Figure 3: Methods of placing gopher traps into burrow systems: (A) Place two traps set in opposite directions in main tunnel; (B) set single trap in lateral tunnel from which soil plug has been removed. Wire each trap to a stake.

Bait can be placed into a burrow system by hand after opening the main tunnel or with a hand probe. Treat two or three of the freshest mounds within each burrow system (a circle with about a 100 foot diameter). To place bait in the burrow system by hand, locate the main by digging with a shovel 12 to 18 inches from the plug side of the mound. Place the recommended amount of bait, following label directions, in each direction of the opened main tunnel and well into the system. Close off each tunnel with sod clumps and soil so gophers do not attempt to close the system and cover the bait with soil.

A less time-consuming baiting method involves using a pointed-rod hand probe. Locate the main tunnel 12 to 18 inches from the plug side of the mound by pressing the probe into the ground (Figure 4). Location of the tunnel can be determined by the decreased friction on the probe. Bait can be placed through the probe hole into the tunnel. A reservoir-type bait probe dispenser is also available for poisoning gophers (Figure 4). A button is pushed on the bait probe when it is pushed in the burrow and a metered dose of bait drops into the burrow. Place the recommended

amount of bait down each of two or three probe openings and then cover the probe holes with sod.

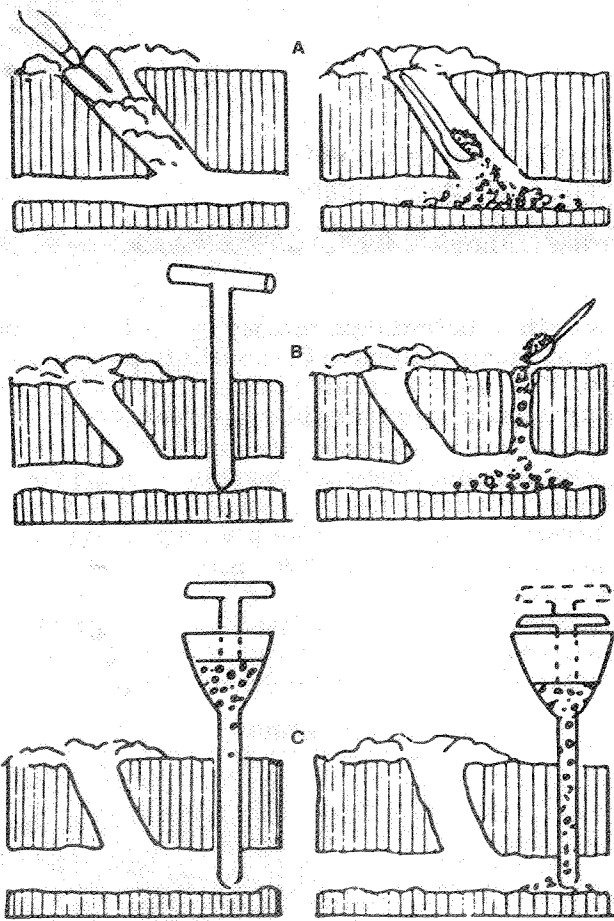


Figure 4: Methods of applying gopher bait by hand or with a probe. (A) Hand application: remove plug in tunnel, starting from gopher mound. Place quantity of bait into main tunnel with a long-handled spoon. Seal tunnel with sod, taking care not to cover bait with soil.

(B) Probe application: Locate main tunnel with probe as described in text. With spoon, drop bait into tunnel through hole made by probe. Cover probe hole with sod.

(C) Bait-dispensing probe: Locate main tunnel with probe. Push lever or plunger to dispense bait into tunnel. Cover probe hole with sod.

The burrow builder mechanically delivers bait underground so large acreages can be economically treated for pocket gopher control. Burrow builders are available in a standard hydraulically operated unit or a three-point hitch model. The device consists of a knife and torpedo assembly that makes an artificial burrow at desired soil depths, a coulter blade that cuts roots of plants ahead of the knife, a seeder assembly for bait dispensing, and packer wheel assembly to close the furrow behind the knife. The seeder box has a metering device for dispensing various poison baits at desired rates. Burrow builders can be used successfully in agricultural and mountainous areas if the soil is not extremely rocky. However,

operations on steep slopes can result in poorly constructed tunnels or damage to the torpedo.

To achieve good results with a burrow builder: 1) adjust the burrow builder to construct tunnels at the same depth as those constructed by gophers in your area so gophers intercept the tunnels; 2) use the machine only when the soil moisture is adequate because if the soil is too dry the burrow may collapse and if the soil is too wet the slot over the tunnel may not close (generally, the soil moisture is adequate if it is damp enough so that a compressed handful will hold its shape); 3) space the burrows at 20- to 30-foot intervals in areas of infestation (burrow spacing is dependent on gopher densities and species involved; usual spacing for the northern and valley pocket gophers is 20 to 25 feet and 25 to 30 feet for the plains and yellow-faced pocket gophers); 4) periodically check to assure formation of a good burrow and check if bait is dispensing down the tube; 5) enclose the perimeter of the field with artificial burrows to prevent reinvasion; 6) follow directions provided with the burrow builder machine. Recommended application rates of 1 to 2 pounds per acre of 0.35 to 0.5 percent strychnine provide 85 to 95 percent control. Any spilled bait should be cleaned up and properly disposed. Any dead gophers found above ground should be buried to reduce hazards to predators and scavengers. Harrowing the field about one week after treatment to level mounds and then retreating by hand or trapping at new mounds should result in more complete control.

Several types of materials and devices are available for fumigating pocket gophers. Fumigants are not very successful for controlling pocket gophers because gophers either sense the poisonous gas and plug the tunnel or the fumigants diffuse into the soil, particularly when it is dry.

Shooting pocket gophers is impractical because they seldom wander above ground.

Buried utility cables and irrigation lines can be protected by enclosure with lead, PVC, or other conduit materials exceeding 2.1 inches in diameter. Pocket gophers can readily damage cables armored with soft metals such as lead and aluminum if the diameters are less than 2.1 inches.

Resources

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