

Holes and voles

Our garden is full of holes. They are about an inch across and go straight down. They are in the lawn, in vegetable beds and in flower beds. The main requirement is that they are near a source of food – more on that later. These holes belong to voles.

We often see the little creatures themselves as they dash from the flowerbed in front of the conservatory across the path into the wild area which is full of blackberries and honeysuckle flowers and berries. Whenever we get a decent view - and sometimes they sit in the open and nibble on some desirable food item in their held in their front feet - we can see that they are bank voles. They have a slightly gingery look, with a tail about half the length of the body, and obvious ears. They are actually very cute.



We sometimes see them as they climb up flower stems and along brambles looking for something nice to eat – berries are firm favourites but they also eat flowers – I have watched one individual repeatedly climb up a pink campion, snip off the flower heads and take them to its burrow. They also teeter up the cosmos stems from time to time to snip off a nice big pink flower.

They do not always have such cute habits though. The finger points at them for eating all the top-growth on my newly planted out antirrhinums this year. And each year they make a considerable onslaught on the strawberries – netting is no use of course, and you can identify the culprits as voles because the fruit is neatly snipped off at the stem, not messily munched in situ as with birds and slugs. They always leave a few around so that you can see what they have been doing! And this year, I believe they took all my gooseberries – one day they were there, a week later they were not, and although the pheasant has been a culprit in the past, he would not have been able to get at some of the fruit in difficult-to-access places.

They obviously cannot eat several pounds of gooseberries in one go so they must have cached them somewhere. We had an example of this once with strawberries. We had covered the space between the rows with black plastic. As I was walking along the plastic picking fruit my foot suddenly squelched most unpleasantly. Investigation under the plastic revealed about a pound of strawberries, neatly snipped off at the stem and placed in a neat pile.

Our garden voles' most irritating eating habit is their passion for beetroot. They eat almost the whole root but leave just a little bit behind so the plant does not die and you think you have a nice crop coming. It has been particularly bad this year – I have only been able to harvest a few, not too badly damaged, roots. Luckily, they ignore the carrots.

The one saving grace is that their population seems cyclical – it has been particular bad (if you are human - I suppose this would be good if you are a vole) this year so maybe not so bad next year?

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