

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

Two Different Kinds of Moles Live Here

New tunnels are beginning to appear in our garden thanks to the spring activity of eastern moles. The inclination of these critters to tunnel through my husband's pansy beds has a rather stimulating effect on his blood pressure; but, if it were not for their shallow tunnels that disrupt the neat appearance of lawns, golf courses, and flower gardens, moles would be highly valued, for they rid our soil of many plant-eating insects, grubs and larva while also aerating the soil.

The type of mole that most of us are familiar with is the eastern mole, which is widespread throughout the eastern part of North America. Most at home in loam and sandy soils it will still tolerate harder clay because of its powerful digging ability. It is one of the largest and strongest of moles and also the best adapted to living underground. They are rarely seen on the surface unless forced out by some predator.

Here in this region, so rich in marshes and other wetlands, we also have sporadic populations of the star-nosed mole. These moles are not only excellent diggers but also good swimmers, able to stay underwater for up to three minutes. In addition they can travel above ground. They have poor eyesight however, and therefore rely heavily on their sensitive and unusual nose.

This nose looks like it has two starfish stuck on the tip. If you hold your wrists together, opening your palms forward while spreading your fingers, you may get an idea of what it looks like. Rather than ten fingers however, star-nosed moles have 22 tentacles that can touch ten different objects a second. When digging the tentacles fold together for protection but when swimming or foraging in the mud they are spread wide. As soon as the tentacles come in contact with a grub or insect it is seized and eaten, while the mole moves on, sensing for the next bit of dinner.

Most moles have about 2,000 specialized nerve endings on their noses; the star-nosed mole however, has 25,000. By living in the soft muddy soils of wetlands star-nosed moles have not had to cope with nose burn from bumping against the hard soils the eastern mole contends with. You might even say that a life in wet soils and water has allowed the star-nosed mole's sense of touch to blossom.