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FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

The European Mole

The European mole has a cylindrical body and is around 12 cm long. Females are typically smaller than males. The eyes are small and hidden behind fur. Its ears are just a small ridge in the skin. The fur is usually dark grey, but the actual range of colors is larger, as due to the subterranean habits there is no disadvantage in off-colored fur.

Moles are found throughout Middle Asia and Europe, but not in Ireland. They are present in most habitats where the soil is deep enough to allow tunnelling but are uncommon in coniferous forests, on moorlands and in sand dunes, probably because their prey is scarce.

Moles spend almost all their lives underground in a system of permanent and semi-permanent tunnels which form a complex network hundreds of metres long at varying depths in the soil. The deepest tunnels are used most 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. The fore limbs are used to dig, shearing soil from the sides of the tunnel with alternate strokes. Hind limbs are used to brace the mole's body against the tunnel walls. The mole turns round, scoops up accumulated soil with its fore limbs and pushes it along a previously dug side tunnel leading to the surface. The soil is pushed out above ground to form a molehill.

Within the tunnel system moles construct one or more spherical nest chambers, each lined with a ball of dry plant material. Nests are used for sleeping and for raising young.

Moles sometimes construct very large mounds containing more than 750kg of soil. The mounds have an internal structure with one or more nests and a network of tunnels and can have food stores. They are built by males and females, and they occur most often in areas with shallow soil on hard substrate and in areas prone to flooding. The fortress acts as a refuge in times of flooding and also helps insulate the nest against low temperatures.

European mole, Talpa europaea

Earthworms are the most important component of the mole's diet; an 80g mole needs 50g of earthworms per day. Moles also eat many insect larvae particularly in the summer. Earthworms dominate the winter diet. Moles sometimes collect and store them alive in special chambers. The stored worms are immobilised by a bite to the head segment; 470 worms have been recorded in one chamber. Food is either actively dug out of the soil by the mole or more often collected from the floor of the tunnel. Many soil animals fall through into the tunnels. Moles rarely forage on the surface. *internet*