



Box 1676  
Camrose, AB  
T4V 1X6  
(780) 678 6450  
[sales@scottqualitylawncafe.ca](mailto:sales@scottqualitylawncafe.ca)  
[scottqualitylawncafe.ca](http://scottqualitylawncafe.ca)

*“Your Home Turf Advantage”*

---

## DAMAGE CAUSED BY VOLES



I'll preface this article with my own encounter with these wee creatures on our little acreage...

Cute hey? Yah???

...Or perhaps until you've ever experienced the damage they can do to your lawn???

So it was a couple winters ago, my first winter since having starting working for Scott's Quality Lawn Care. I still had lots to learn about lawn care... and I got my first serious lesson the following spring ---

We received more than the average amount of snow that winter... My snow banks from all the shovelling were over 4 feet high in some places and at least 2½ to 3 feet deep throughout my front lawn... So there was a lot to melt once the end of winter was approaching. That's kind of normal where I live, sometimes a little less snow, sometimes a little more, especially if there are any winter blizzards and drifting snow.

It warmed up quite a bit by late March/early April and the sun was melting everything rather quickly. Then came the big surprise, one unusually warm day in particular, as much of my front lawn's snow had almost totally disappeared...

My wife and I just about cried when we saw that literally about 80% of our lawn was destroyed... What happened to our lawn? We've always cared for our lawn and maintained it very well so this was nothing short of a huge shock to us... The only part that wasn't destroyed was a small area around our fire pit which we sat around occasionally during the winter wherein the snow on top of the grass there was packed and maybe only a couple inches deep...

*“Your Home Turf Advantage”*

It wasn't just the obvious tunnels and trails dug throughout the majority of our front lawn's surface but entire swaths of what was once very healthy lush green sod, was now totally barren, chewed up/eaten up, and the ground below was showing... Where had our beautiful grass gone?

Where there were tunnels, you could push aside the remaining dead grass remnants, but where there wasn't and it was barren, yah, the grass was chewed away entirely, at least the top 7/8's of our grass blades... They didn't seem to have eaten down to the roots but the question is, would it recover or were we going to have to re-seed or re-sod again (which would have been a massive job)?

I can't tell you how much our hearts sank when we saw the extensive damage.

I immediately guessed right at what had happened as I remembered seeing what I thought were little playful field mice here and there popping in and out from the snow on a couple previous warmer winter days. But I guess we hadn't thought they actually made their home within our lawn. We naively thought they were just visiting, right? Presumably looking for food? We learned pretty fast that we actually helped them choose our lawn without us realizing that... Allow me to explain...

We have about a 12" to 15" deep dry creek running throughout our sloped front yard to help with drainage when we get heavy rainfalls... It's lined with rocks on the sides making it like a little canyon for rain water to exit our property... And as we could clearly see, vole droppings were everywhere along it, not just a little bit, but we must have had an entire community of voles living here... I dare say it ended up being a super-highway for them under our snow banks. In 20/20 hindsight it makes perfect sense --- The high snow banks provided great insulation and they had this express freeway under that running the entire length of my front yard. Unfortunately, I had left my grass a little taller the previous fall than I normally do and I didn't get to the final raking up of my fall leaves before the snow had happened, so yah, I kind of set the stage for my very serious vole problem...

Add to that one more key mistake we made, too...

We love birds and we had bird houses and bird feeders everywhere in our yard. As you may know, birds aren't exactly tidy eaters. They were always making a mess and seeds were always falling on the ground and grass below the bird feeders. The deer around here loved that but apparently so did something else. The birds also carried it with them when perched on the trees amidst our front lawn, and needless to say, they dropped seeds everywhere onto my lawn...

**Have you guessed what bird seed is to a vole?**

**Plentiful dessert to an already abundant main course supply of lawn grass shoots... A glorious food feast for these voracious little voles.... an endless supply for them over the winter. They had their own little paradise underneath my snow banks.**

**Yah, so I think you get the picture... OUR FRONT LAWN WAS ESSENTIALLY DESTROYED. You couldn't tell that it was once thick lush sod.**

To say that *"damage from voles can be a very unpleasant site in the spring, once the snow has melted away, when you see your lawn for the first time in months"*, is perhaps putting it very mildly. But then again, perhaps your encounter with vole damage wasn't or may not be as bad as ours was.

**So what did we immediately learn from our bad experience:**

(FYI... By the way, I know better now... These kind of circumstances are sometimes the best teacher, I dare say... and since working at Scott's Quality Lawn Care, I've learned a few more things, too, thankfully...)

1. Always mow your lawn shorter in the fall in preparation for the winter months ahead.

***"Your Home Turf Advantage"***

2. Be sure you have raked away ALL fallen leaves (not just once but as many times as necessary if need be should more accumulate again later) plus any other organic debris that may be on your lawn, before the snow starts to fall.
3. We love birds but we removed some of our bird feeders and relocated others far away from our front lawn. (One of the beneficial side effects of this was that it also kept the foraging deer off our front lawn, as well as their droppings.... right?)
4. It may seem like a rather bizarre thing to do, but every winter since then, we don't shovel off or throw all our snow onto the usual places creating large snow banks like we used to... We've been trying to spread it out more evenly. Plus, as soon as the snow banks are starting to melt and shrink, we get out there and start spreading some of those snow banks and piles onto the lawn to spread it all out more evenly so it melts quicker under the sun (not all stacked in tall snow banks taking a lot longer to melt away).

NOTE: We had noticed that wherever the piled snow had not been that deep on our lawn, there were no vole trails underneath it, but wherever the snow was deeper, that's clearly where they were thriving all winter long.)

\*\*\* NOTE: Just to clarify... Just because we experienced voles under our snow banks in the winter, doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to... It could happen as it did for us, but it also might not. It just depends upon whether the voles are in your area and looking for food and shelter... And then if the conditions and environment are right for them, then they might choose your lawn as their home for the winter... But HOPEFULLY NOT.

**At this point, I MUST digress for a moment... and provide one further cautionary note ---**

This may even seem to contradict some of what I've said above but allow me to explain... Spreading out the snow on your snowbanks or anywhere that's on your lawn comes with a caveat.

Normally, it's not a great idea to regularly walk on your lawn during the cold snowy winter months. It can be hard on the grass for obvious reasons. It's at this time of the year that your grass is more fragile and less flexible... It's weaker so make sure, for one, that you don't leave anything heavy on your lawn throughout the winter, or try to move or slide anything heavy across it. Similarly, too much traffic or walking repeatedly on the same snow-cleared, well-worn path to perhaps a storage shed across the lawn, can damage frozen grass blades, affecting how the lawn looks come spring. It's best to minimize any walking on your snow on your lawn whether packed down, cleared, or not.

What happens is, the water molecules within the grass blades are frozen and expanded and can cause cellular damage to the grass, and therefore, when any pressure is applied, they are likely to break.

Or as in my situation, I walk onto the snow-covered lawn here and there to spread out a bit with my shovel any excessive large snow banks to make a less ideal habitat below them for any voles. Again, I say... may you never encounter as serious a vole problem as we did that one year.

There is a potential downside to this, though, if you're doing this frequently. Removing large amounts of snow by spreading it around more evenly, exposes the lawn below it to more freezing elements... The insulative factor of those snow banks is lessened and depending upon how harsh the weather conditions, this may be a bit too excessive of a new blast of winter weather... Not to mention that if you're not careful, any shovelling you do, if you're removing that much, may actually tear up your lawn.

There's definitely the argument to be made that it's best to leave the snow where it falls till it eventually melts on its own once the warmer weather approaches for spring.

To sum up this cautionary note, I'll use my own personal example...

***“Your Home Turf Advantage”***

Yes, there is a risk when shovelling or spreading out snow banks but should it possibly harm the lawn, the question is whether that would actually be worse than the potential vole damage that can be incurred in a serious vole infestation as we've experienced. Like I said, lessening those snow banks helped get rid of the voles as we made their home under the snow less desirable.

You'd have to consider which might be worse in your estimation and situation... the possible damage from occasionally walking on your snow and spreading it out more evenly versus the possible damage from the voles. The latter in our experience has always been far more serious than any damage from walking on the winter snow or spreading that snow around. Come spring too, our grass bounces back quite quickly from our regular lawn care routine of fertilization, weed control and our Enrich soil enhancer spray regimen. It's up to you... but the cautionary note is definitely worth mentioning.

**So did all the above solve our problem?**

**Actually, it did, believe it or not... But there's more to it than just that...**

**Let's get down to the nitty-gritty of who these little creatures are and the damage they can cause, and most importantly, what we can do to hopefully deter them from choosing our lawns as their home turf for their little vole communities ---**

To make matters potentially worse, vole damage tends to appear that much more dramatic when it's combined with other conditions that can potentially affect one's lawn that go along with winter including snow mold disease and winter kill but that's another story...

## **SO ARE VOLES THE SAME AS FIELD MICE OR MOLES?**

### **Voles Compared to Mice -**

Voles are small rodents very similar in size and appearance to some types of mice. It's not easy to tell them apart. These two rodents look so similar that voles are often (incorrectly) referred to as field mice or meadow mice. However, they have different-coloured fur. Mice are usually grey, and voles have brown to reddish-brown, almost chestnut-colored fur, with a white stomach.

Mice are larger than voles measuring up to 20 cm long, head to tail, and weigh up to 50 grams. Unlike voles, mice have larger ears and larger eyes. Voles are smaller, reaching a length of 11 cm and weighing up to 30 grams. Their tail, eyes and ears, and legs are smaller than those of a mouse. They tend to have a more blunt nose and stocky bodies. They have more fur than regular mice and it can even be difficult to make out their ears through their fur.

Mice and voles are both herbaceous. They don't hibernate regardless of the season. Their typical habitat is countryside areas situated in close proximity to wherever there's suitable cover such as wooded areas, parklands, areas with bushes and shrubs, and tall grasses. And, voles love lawns, too, especially over the winter months, given the right circumstances, as I mentioned from my own experiences above.

Unlike mice, they're actually not as active during the night as during the day. You're more likely to see voles foraging around during the daytime, if you notice them at all. Voles are livelier than mice, too, but are quite stealthy and adept at staying hidden from predators such as hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, and house cats, as well as us humans. They are nimble and fast creatures. They can jump very high if needed and they can squeeze into surprisingly tight spaces to hide.

***“Your Home Turf Advantage”***

## Voles Compared to Moles -

Also, voles are sometimes confused with another common landscape pest, moles, because of their tunneling. However, these two species are actually completely unrelated. Moles spend nearly all of their time beneath the surface of the soil, excavating and navigating a network of tunnels which can be very disruptive to the lawn surface above. Moles look distinctively different with their pinkish long hairless snoot-like noses and their big front digging claws for feet... You can't really see their eyes or ears. Aside from time spent in underground burrows, voles do most of their scavenging and feeding above ground.

Whereas voles will eat plants (V for vegetation... V for voles) as noted below, carnivorous moles ignore plants and seek out protein sources such as insects, worms and grubs (M for meat-eaters... M for moles).

Voles are opportunists, too, meaning, if they have a chance for an easy source or supply of food, guess where they're going to settle?

### What Do Voles Eat?

A vole's diet is also quite varied. They'll mostly eat plants, vegetables, and berries, as well as some small insects. Everything in your yard or garden can be a source of food. They also love to chew the vulnerable stems of young trees and shrubs and woody ornamental plants, causing potentially severe damage and dieback. Hence, why your lawns can be a good food source for them, too. They don't like to feed out in the open but amidst sheltered areas or covered overhead by snow banks, for example, it's the perfect protected environment for them to feed in.

## SO WHAT KIND OF DAMAGE DO THEY DO?

**These are some of the most common tell-tale signs of voles in your yard:**

- Tunneling paths from 1" to 3" wide in the lawn surface.
- The vole burrows will look like holes in the lawn or around the bases of trees.
  - Unlike molehills, these burrows do not feature soil mounding.
- Areas of your lawn where the grass is suddenly very short.
- Noticeable gnaw marks on the stems of woody plants and young trees or shrubs.
  - Exposed stems that have been gnawed to a pointed tip.
- Dead plants that, when lifted, have no viable root structure remaining.
  - Ironically though, they don't typically eat your grass down to the roots; it's usually only the grass shoots.
- **NOTE:** Since voles reproduce rapidly, it's critical to control the population at the first sign of infestation.
  - [More about that later] Generally speaking, the voles will go to wherever they have a readily available source or supply of food, and especially if it's a sheltered environment.
  - If they're denied that, they'll look for better accommodations elsewhere, so to speak.

As mentioned earlier, vole damage is usually most prominent during winters with long continuous periods of snow coverage - the higher the snow banks and deeper the snow, the better from their perspective. The snow not only provides an amply insulated environment for them but it also provides the voles with a sense of protection from natural predators as they can move about freely under the snow cover without exposure to the outside or their natural enemies.

You won't typically find them under only a little snow covering; it's under deeper snow banks that they prefer.

Voles will essentially tunnel along the surface of the lawn protected by the snow and create turf damage by their many short forays from their burrow to feeding on the grass shoots' tissue all along these tunnels.

***“Your Home Turf Advantage”***

Needless to say, the continuous “wear” from the traffic of their network of criss-cross tunnelling across the lawn, plus the left behind layers of their excrement, can cause considerable damage.

Fortunately, voles don’t actually feed on the roots of the grass but rather only the grass shoots. Therefore the damage they cause is usually not considered life threatening to the grass.

As I said in the preface to this article, their damage looks devastating and seemingly unrecoverable, but with a little maintenance, all is not lost. Usually, grass plants will re-grow in the damaged areas as the weather warms.



### **YES, YOUR LAWN CAN RECOVER FROM VOLE DAMAGE**

Firstly, consider these common law care practices to address any vole problem:

**If the damage is minor** --- Your lawn will likely recover on its own. Simply rake up the areas of matted down turf or any grass and thatch that they’ve loosened. Then maintain those areas as you normally would for the rest of your lawn.

**If the damage is more severe** --- And if the tunnelling has been rather extensive, a more aggressive approach may be warranted which will include:

- Raking it first to gather up and remove any loose grass and debris.
- Over-seeding those damaged areas and watering as normal till it recovers.
- You could add a little top-dressing to assist the repairing of the damaged areas but not too much that it smothers the new growth.
- **NOTE:** Remember to NOT apply any fertilizer or herbicide too soon to any newly seeded or over-seeded grass areas as that can hinder the new seed germination.
  - Wait till those repaired areas have fully grown and been mowed a couple times along with the rest of the lawn... Then you’ll know it’s ready to be included in any fertilizing or weed-killing via herbicide thereafter. Given that the damage isn’t down to the grass roots, your repaired areas should recover fairly soon with proper ongoing routine maintenance.

***“Your Home Turf Advantage”***

# HOW TO GET RID OF VOLES

As we discovered the first time we encountered them, there's nothing worse than spending all that time, effort and money on beautifying your yard and lawns only to discover vole damage.

You want to prevent that from happening, if at all possible. Some of this we've touched on briefly already... Here's what you can do to hopefully deter them from making a home in your yard:

## 1. **Habitat modification** - indirectly addresses any vole problem

*Pros: May take more time to see results / can be effective depending upon circumstances / poison-free*

*Cons: Requires some ongoing effort to make your yard and lawn less attractive to the voles*

The fact is, voles don't like to feed out in the open... As mentioned earlier, they prefer protected sheltered areas wherein they won't fall prey to their predators. As such, don't give them "the ideal habitat" to move into. I guess that's easier said than done, realistically, depending upon what you want to do within your yard. But where you don't need it or don't want it, consider removing dense ground cover, and relocate any wood piles, compost piles, brush piles, and other sources of cover well away from your lawn areas.

Additionally, keep your lawn mowed regularly, dethatch your grass once a year. In the fall time, remove all fallen leaves and be sure to cut your grass at a lower height in preparation for the winter. And mulch lightly around trees and shrubs. Of course, keep up with snow removal so that you're not giving them an insulated environment to live within. Try not to shovel your snow onto such large snow banks; where possible spread it out more.

## 2. **Protect young trees and shrubs** - indirectly addresses any vole problem

*Pros: May take more time to see results / can be effective depending upon circumstances / poison-free*

*Cons: Requires some ongoing effort to make your yard and lawn less attractive to the voles, as above*

Voiles love to gnaw on the roots, trunks and branches of young trees and shrubs because they are feeding on the starches and sugars to stay alive during the winter... and if those happen to be situated within your lawn, your lawn is likely to fall prey to them, too. To discourage this behavior and remove a favorite food source, consider wrapping the lower trunk of young trees with a guard, like a wire mesh/hardware cloth or plastic tubing. Place the hardware cloth or plastic tubing around the base of young trees to protect them from voles. The mesh should be ¼ inch or less in size and should be buried at least 3 inches below ground level to prevent voles from burrowing underneath them. The tops of them should be higher than the typical snow-line level, too.

## 3. **Use traps** - directly addresses any vole problem

*Pros: Fast / can be effective but typically not enough to reduce vole populations significantly / poison-free*

*Cons: Requires you to check and change traps frequently, and dispose of dead voles*

Of course, voles are similar to mice in that any typical mouse traps can catch and kill them instantly, too. These can be an effective means for eliminating voles in your yard but it won't happen over night; it'll take some time. These are most effective when positioned in front of vole holes and baited with peanut butter or oatmeal, for example.

Alternately, live vole traps can be used to trap these little critters without killing or injuring them.

***"Your Home Turf Advantage"***

Although live traps may not be the best strategy for severe vole infestations, they'll at least help you to remove some individual voles and get some control over their numbers. Of course, if you're live trapping them and subsequently releasing them back into the wild, be sure to release them as far as possible away from yours or any neighbours' properties, or you may find that they come right back to yours or a neighbour's property.

#### 4. **Use repellents** - directly addresses any vole problem

Chemical vole repellents are effective ways to oblige voles to leave their burrows and your property.

**Pros:** *Effective / fast*

**Cons:** *These often include dangerous chemicals and as such, may not be safe for use around kids and pets.*

Alternately, some people have had success with natural repellents such as sprinkling a bit of castor oil around their landscape to deter voles. Apparently, they hate the taste and smell of castor oil. Voles also dislike capsaicin, the potent compound found in peppers that makes them taste spicy. As such, some people have DIY'ed their own natural repellent to deter voles. They mix finely chopped hot peppers with water and biodegradable dish soap. Then they spray vole hotspots in their lawn and landscaping with the mixture to prevent voles from nibbling on their plants. Proponents of this natural repellent claim it's just as effective as other conventional methods, so perhaps that's worth a try, too.

Others have tried coffee grounds to deter voles and while there is some evidence that it can work, you'd have to be careful as to how much to apply. Dumping a large amount of coffee grounds on your soil or lawn can cause nitrogen depletion, making it difficult for anything to grow. If trying this approach, experiment a bit first by lightly sprinkling the coffee grounds around a vole hole where you've noticed vole activity.

#### 5. **Use Vole poisons or chemical baits** - directly addresses any vole problem

Vole poisons are designed to kill voles upon ingestion. The poisons may mimic the smell or appearance of popular vole food sources and generally kills the rodents within 12 to 24 hours of eating them.

**Pros:** *Effective / fast*

**Cons:** *The risk exists of possibly poisoning non-target species who may ingest the poison such as chipmunks and squirrels, plus there's also a risk of secondary poisoning for animals (like pets and birds of prey) who may eat poisoned voles.*

#### 6. **Contact a professional pest management company** - directly addresses any vole problem

Needless to say, if you have a severe vole infestation and you have to get rid of them as fast as you can, there's always the option of calling in a professional pest control company. They tend to offer more options for ending any infestation and reclaiming your lawn.

**So in summary...**

**Cute little creatures or potential lawn-destroyers? It's your call on that... If you ever encounter voles, may you NOT encounter them as I did...**

Fortunately, if you employ the right preventative measures we've mentioned, before you get an ongoing vole infestation, your lawn should recover and you can get rid of the voles.

As I mentioned in this article's preface... we got rid of ours and they've never come back and it's now two years later... So what we did, worked for us, and it may for you, too.

***“Your Home Turf Advantage”***

We all wish there was a magic easy solution for every lawn care problem or challenge we ever might encounter. But, oftentimes, it takes a combination of common-sense, routine maintenance with some perseverance added to the effort, and sometimes some special products to apply if deemed essential, and you can still get your lawn looking great no matter what may occasionally befall it.

We trust you'll be able to glean some help from this article.

All the best to you!

---

**\*\*\* SPECIAL NOTE \*\*\***

*We love helping our clients have great-looking lawns! Of course, we always welcome your inquiries, but we also want to help educate you, too. So many of you have told us how much you appreciate the articles we make available to you.*

*If there are any questions you may have about your lawn or any challenges or problems you may occasionally encounter with your lawn, don't hesitate to give us a call. As with the above info article you've just read, we also have other highly beneficial lawn care articles, too...*

*Here are some we've created to support you with your lawn care efforts. They can help you identify any problems as well as offer some possible solutions for some of those occasional challenges lawns can encounter.*

*These info articles are not meant to be one-time definitive cures for whatever might ail your lawn. We all wish it was only that simple... But, there are no magic "spray this once and your lawn will be perfect thereafter" solutions... Unfortunately, those don't really exist, as much as we might all like them to. However, there are many things you can do to get your lawn in great shape and keep it that way. We encourage you to glean what you can from any of the following articles that may interest you. And for what you're not sure about, give us a call, let's talk about it, and we'll do what we can to help you.*

*You may reach us at 780-678-6450 if you'd like to receive any of these via email. It would be our pleasure to do our part to help you "make your lawn the envy of your neighbours"...*

From Our "**PROACTIVE LAWN CARE**" Series Of Articles —

*7 Steps To A Great Lawn*

*Caring For Our Lawn Over The Winter*

*Proactively Preparing Your Lawn For Drought Conditions*

From Our "**WHAT YOU'RE NOT TOLD**" Series Of Articles —

*What You're Not Told About All-Natural & Organic Lawn Care Alternatives*

*What You're Not Told About Bats & Their Guano*

From Our "**WHY?**" Series Of Articles —

*Why Is My Grass So Thin?*

*Why Dead Spots On My Lawn?*

*Why Am I Getting Mushrooms In My Lawn?*

*Why Are The Pine Needles Killing My Grass?*

...See more on next page...

***"Your Home Turf Advantage"***

From Our **“HOW TO GET RID OF...”** Series Of Articles —

*How To Get Rid of Ants*

*How To Get Rid of Dew Worms*

*How To Get Rid of Fairy Rings*

*How To Get Rid of Quackgrass*

*How To Get Rid of Thistles*

From Our **“DAMAGE BY DOGS & OTHER CRITTERS”** Series of Articles —

*Fixing & Preventing Dog Spots*

*Damage Caused by Voles*

From Our **“SEEDING LAWNS”** Series Of Articles —

*Grass Seeding For New Lawns*

*Overseeding For Existing Lawns*

From Our **“DIY”** Series Of Articles —

*DIY\_Alternate Ways To Remove Weeds In Gravel Areas*

From Our **“COMMON LAWN FUNGAL DISEASES”** Series Of Articles —

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases (Compendium Of All Common Ones)*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_The Usual Causes*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Snow Mold*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Leaf Spot & Melting Out*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Ascochyta Turf Leaf Blight*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Brown Patch*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Summer Patch*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Pythium Blight*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Red Thread*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Rust Diseases*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Powdery Mildew*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Dollar Spot*

*Common Lawn Fungal Diseases\_Fairy Ring*

---

## **INFORMATION ON OUR FIVE PRIMARY LAWN CARE SERVICES —**

### **FERTILIZER & WEED CONTROL:**

*Our Fertilization & Weed Control Program*

*Possible Reasons For Still Having Weeds*

*Ten Reasons Our Program is Different*

### **ENRICH SOIL ENHANCER:**

*Our Enrich Soil Enhancer Program*

*Different Soil Types Have Different pH Levels*

### **WEEKLY MOWING:**

*How The Weekly Lawn Mowing Works*

*Our Quality Control Program*

*Ten Reasons We Are Different*

...See more on next page...

***“Your Home Turf Advantage”***

**CORE AERATION:**

*Why Aerate Your Lawn?*

**POWER RAKING:**

*Why Power-Rake Your Lawn?*