

Title, "Pocket Gophers Don't Bother Me."

Alternate title, "Pocket Gophers Don't Bother Me as Much as They Used To"

They used to bother me. In fact, for many years pocket gophers bothered me a lot. I tried to wipe them out. They kept reappearing. But then, why wouldn't they keep reappearing? Our farm has a three-mile perimeter. There are pocket gophers everywhere around the border.

My relationship with these rodents goes back a long way. As a boy, I trapped them on my family's dairy farm south of Elk River. The mounds were especially troublesome in the alfalfa fields. My father's land was heavy clay. The mounds tended to plug the sickle mower. The largest and hardest mounds could cause structural damage to the mower. Wright County paid 10 cents a set for gopher feet. Good money at the time.

Our Snake River Farm is east of St. Cloud on the Anoka Sand Plain. The Sand Plain is a roughly triangular area. One corner is on the eastern edge of St. Cloud. The opposite side runs north and south along the Wisconsin border from Stillwater to South Saint Paul. The sand plain is the outwash of a melting glacier. Our upland soil is essentially beach sand. Pretty easy digging from a pocket gopher's perspective. At times, an entire colony of mounds will appear in just a day or two. These mounds are not hard. At least not until they get a good sod over them which in this poor soil can take years.

I bought the first part of this farm in 1969. It was an abused and run down piece of earth. I could walk from end to end of a 40-acre field stepping only on gopher mounds. I grew corn in the fields for a decade or so. A couple years of plowing and injecting anhydrous ammonia got rid of the gophers. At least it did in the plowed land. I pastured most of the rest of the farm. Grazing does tend to keep the gophers in check. I think the hoof traffic is hard on the tunnels in the soft sand.

One spring the gophers moved up out of the road ditch and killed hundreds of young pines. We had planted the trees as barriers and wildlife habitat on the edges of the farm. The gophers were able to annihilate entire rows of four and five foot tall pines.

That was too much. All out gopher war followed. Gail W located a used Gopher Getter at an auction and I bought it. Gopher Getter is a brand name. The machine mounts on a three-point hitch, makes a tunnel and deposits poison pellets in a single pass. It is quite effective if the soil and the following weather conditions are right. The machine did the job. Nevertheless, I never liked the concept of spreading poison across my pastures. I worried that I was killing more than just gophers. That feeling was at its worse whenever I saw a corn snake slithering away from me as I poisoned my way across a gopher colony. The corn snake was there to eat the gophers and I was filling them with poison.

For a few years now, I have been attending seminars and collecting reading material on holistic farming. I don't care for the word "holistic". It is too trendy or modern for me but the concepts these folks teach make a lot of sense. I have learned a lot.

To the extent reasonable, I have adopted or maybe a better word is adapted to the holistic concepts. That other trendy word "sustainability" fits in here also. For some reason sustainable does not offend me as much as holistic. That aside, the fundamental holistic and sustainable issues of good land stewardship, good animal husbandry, products for consumption by people we get to know, and profitable farming all work for me.

In practical application, holistic management means looking for ways that the different elements of an operation can work together. For me it also means looking for ways that one task or practice can flow into another. It means looking for ways to reduce outside inputs and expenses by doing things in a simpler fashion.

At one of the seminars, the instructor mentioned that gophers bring new minerals into the higher root zones when they build mounds. That was the excuse I needed to change my attitude about gophers. It has become my practice now to harrow my pastures with my horses at least once a year. I think it does a number of good things particularly if done early in the spring. I think the harrow breaks up light thatch, helps to plant grass seeds, kills shallow weed seedlings and breaks up late season manure piles. If done early and when my soil is mellow and soft, it does a good job of leveling gopher mounds. The harrow levels the previous year's mounds and even older, sodded mounds shed a couple inches of dirt with each pass. The work is good for my horses too. We do a lot of wagon and sled rides on our farm and the horse teams get better the more they get used.

I still use the Gopher Getter along tree plantings. And I do use it if a dense colony appears. But I no longer feel like I'm doing a poor job when I see a few mounds here and there. I figure those gophers are turning my minerals and providing habitat for corn snakes and an occasional badger. No stress in that.

I don't image that this particular practice will work for you. My point is we can all find ways to go with the flow of nature to improve our farming practices and improve our own lives. Give it some thought.

I hope to see you at the Fair. Best regards. Tom Barthel