

# Baffling dirt mounds



Dirt castings at the Lion's Camp

Dirt mounds litter the ground at the Lion's Camp in Lamoille Canyon. These coils of dirt are about three inches in diameter and snake across the ground as if impersonating a snake. In some areas, the dirt castings cross over rocks and occasionally circle around and cross themselves. When I kick apart one, it is not hollow but solid masses of dirt.

Such snaking mounds are common in the Ruby Mountains and are especially noticeable in spring, as snow melts away and before vegetation conceals them. They are common in meadows but are also found on surprisingly steep ground.

The culprit of this littering is the northern pocket gopher, which looks something like a mole. Weighing less than a pound, its body is six-to-nine inches long, including a two-to-three-inch-long tail. The thickset body is almost hairless, with powerful shoulders and front legs tipped with long claws. A short neck supports a blunt head with tiny eyes and

ears. Sharp upper teeth are always in view since the lips are capable of closing behind these teeth.

The name pocket gopher comes from its large cheek pouches that can carry food and nesting materials. This is the only true gopher living near Elko, since what we routinely call a gopher is actually a ground squirrel.

Pocket gophers spend 99% of their lives underground, digging tunnels. One animal's lifetime production will usually cover less than one acre. The tunnels are two to five inches wide and serve two purposes. One type is dug near the surface and used for gathering food. As it encounters roots, tubers and bulbs, the pocket gopher simply eats them. The second tunnel is deeper, used for storage, shelter and raising young.

Their favorite habitat is meadows with deep soil. As pocket gophers dig, they push the loosened dirt behind themselves. At night, they feel safe in coming to the surface to push excess dirt across the ground in a distinctive fan shape.

Pocket gophers do not hibernate during long alpine winters. They continue digging tunnels but feel safer above ground since they remain buried deep in snow. These tunnels sometime travel through snow several inches above the ground. Excess tunnel dirt is then pushed and packed into these tunnels through snow.

In spring, the snow melts away and reveals the dirt packed tunnels. These castings of packed dirt settle to the ground, leaving mysterious dirt coils.

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