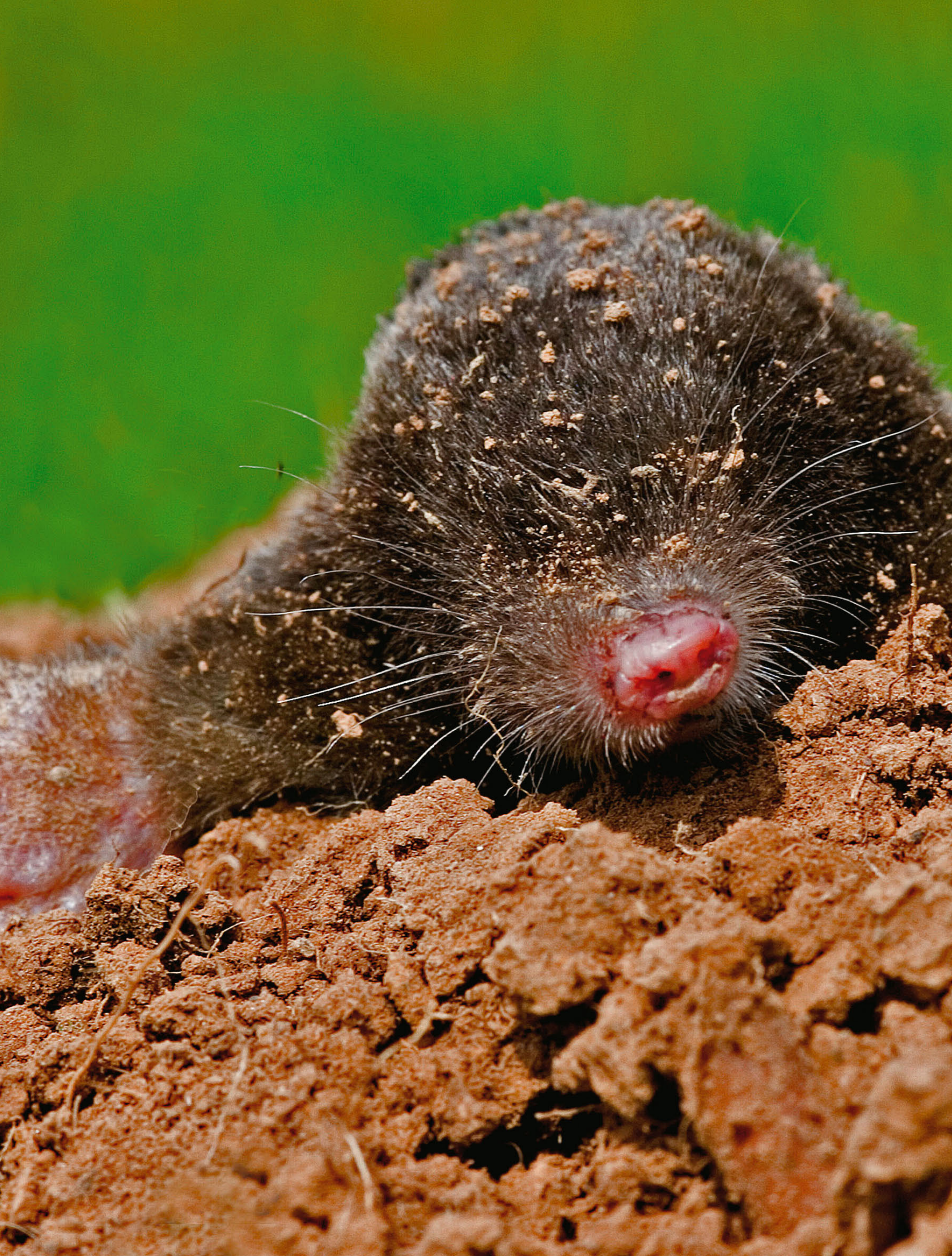


Holey moley!

Fêted in literature and as reviled in myth as it can sometimes be in real life, the mole is the mammal equivalent of Marmite, says **Harry Pearson**, as he tunnels into the subterranean world of the 'gentleman in velvet'

THE mole can be faulted for many things. His old English name, 'mould-warp', means 'earth-thrower'. The soil he carelessly flings around causes damage to farm machinery. The soft hills he creates with his subterranean burrowing endangers the limbs of livestock and horses and brings green keepers and groundsmen out in a cold sweat. His mining slices through the roots of crops and causes flowers to wither and flop. His inconsiderate dirt chucking renders silage unpalatable to cattle and can spread listeria. Defenders counter that he aerates the soil, improves drainage and eats the underground grubs that feed on plants. In Germany, in recognition of his environmental work, the mole is protected by law.

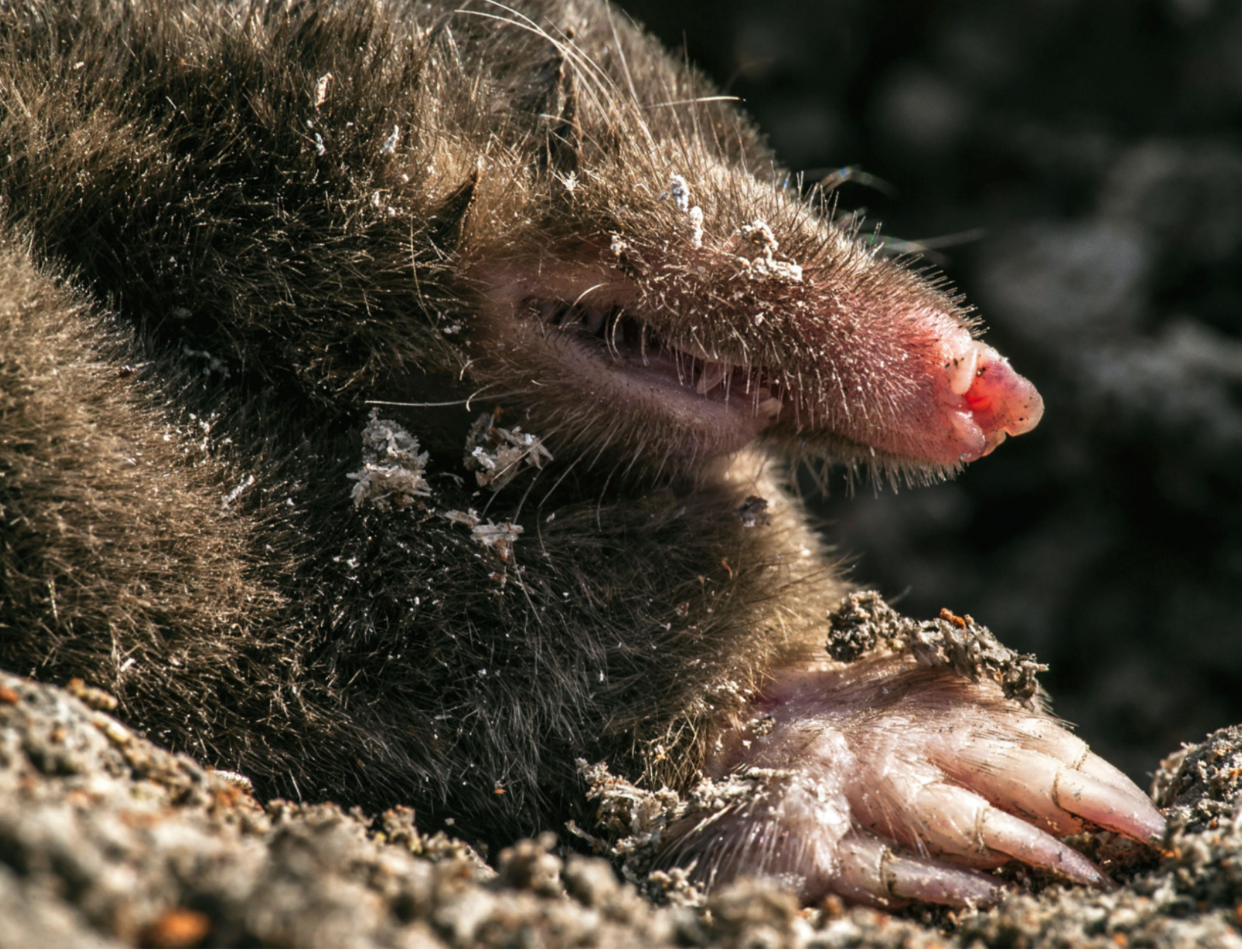
Something both friends and foe can agree on, however, is the mole's work ethic. The 5in-long creature digs at a rate that puts the hi-tech boring equipment used by Crossrail to shame, excavating 20 yards in a single day. In his five-year lifespan, he will build enough tunnels to stretch from Kent to the Pas de Calais. Nor does he prioritise speed over quality. The mole is no cowboy. The tunnels he constructs are sturdy. They can see service for more than 20 years.

> 'In a mole's five-year lifespan, he will build tunnels to stretch from Kent to Calais'

Were it not for the havoc he wreaks, this hard-working animal would undoubtedly be an object of wider admiration. As it is, we tread warily when he is around. There are an estimated 40 million moles in Britain (Ireland is as free of moles as it is of snakes, although St Patrick takes no credit in that case). Were they to gather in packs, moles might cause the entire nation to subside. Thankfully, they don't. The mole is a solitary creature, who seeks out company only in the spring mating, when he builds a love nest in the form of a vast molehill known as a fortress. The rest of the time, he is far too busy hunting and digging to socialise.

The mole is perfectly adapted to his underground kingdom. He has a sausage-shaped body, a stumpy tail, tiny back legs and beefy forearms that drive huge, spade-like paws, each blessed with an extra thumb. The paws face backwards and are tipped with long and powerful claws. He is as well built for digging as anything the engineers at JCB or Liebherr could design. His blood also helps him →

A mole's nose is a highly tuned instrument, so he can 'see' through smell and touch



Perfectly designed: a mole's fearsome claws flip earth more effectively than a state-of-the-art digger and his fur bends all ways

absorb more oxygen from his claustrophobic environment and his tiny eyes—capable of nothing much more than distinguishing the difference between dark and light—tell him the time of day and the changing of the seasons.

The mole's primary sensory organ is his nose. The tiny pink snout has clusters of highly sensitive nerves that—like a finely tuned version of a cat's whiskers—detect vibrations. He can also smell 'in stereo', each nostril separately processing scents to create a highly detailed picture of what is going on around him. The mole may be blind, but, thanks to his snout, he can pinpoint a succulent earthworm with the same accuracy that a hovering kestrel spies a field mouse.

Tunnels are not the only thing moles build. They also hollow out chambers. Some are used as larders and stocked with earthworms to be eaten in drought or frost. Others are lined with grass to make cosy living quarters in which they can sleep and rear their young. The latter gave rise to the image of the domesticated, house-proud mole, the creature we meet in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (where Mole is encountered 'spring cleaning his little home'). In Alison Uttley's charming children's stories, *The Tales of Little Grey Rabbit*, Moldy Warp the Mole is an amiable, home-loving, treasure-hunter—the mammalian equivalent of Toby Jones in *The Detectorists*.

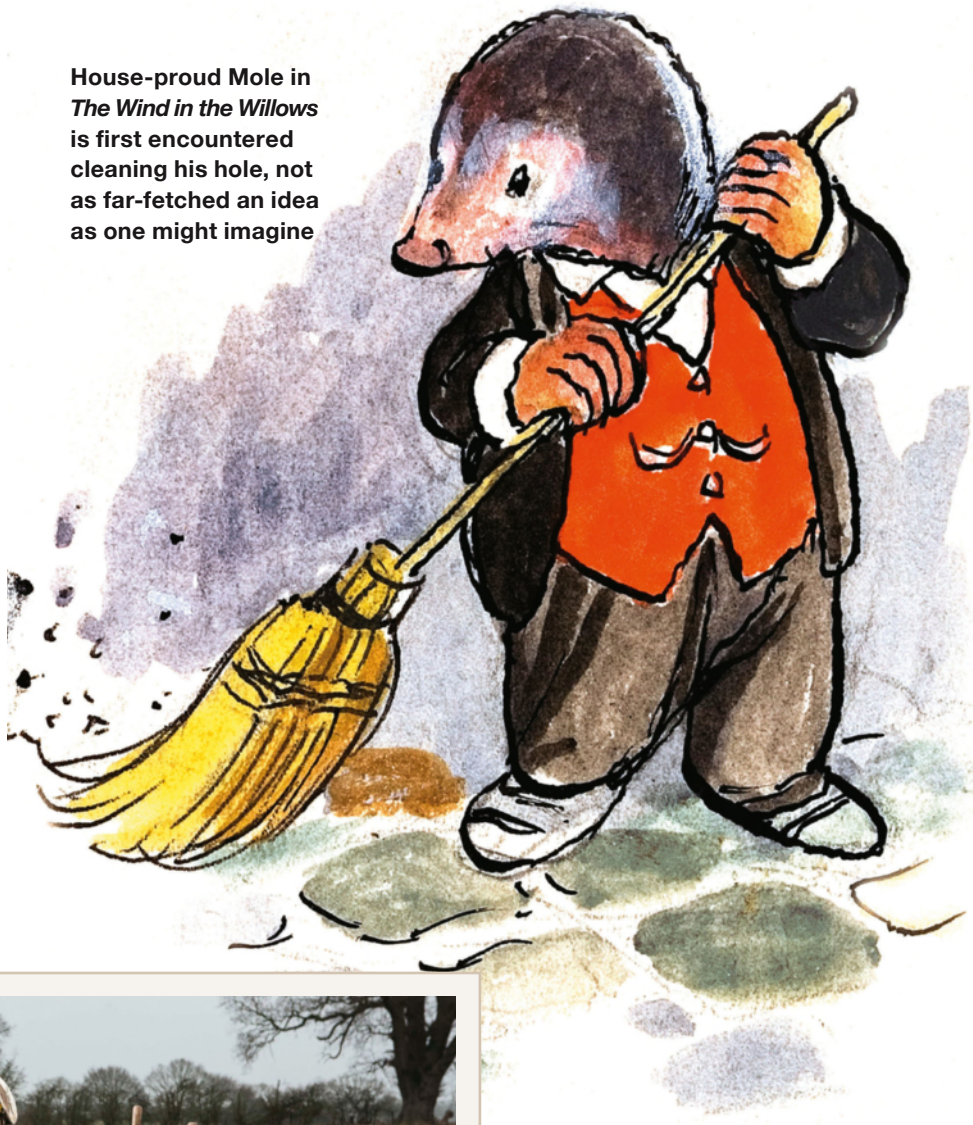
> 'He has to be able to change course swiftly; he cannot be rubbed up the wrong way'

Grahame's mole felt safe beneath the ground ('Once underground, you know exactly where you are,' he says) because his main predators—apart from stoats and Man—are tawny owls and the buzzards. We may wish them well. Theologian and scientist the Revd William Buckland pronounced the flesh of the mole to be vile tasting, ranking it alongside the blue-bottle as the most horrible thing he had eaten. As the eccentric Victorian clergyman had scoffed just about every creature on the planet (as well as a sliver of the preserved heart of Louis XV), we may rely on his judgement.

The mole is not edible, but he is wearable. His short dense hairs are soft and velvety to the touch. Most animal fur grows backwards towards the tail, but the mole has to be able to change course swiftly facing an obstacle or threat, so his fur bends in every direction. A mole cannot be rubbed up the wrong way.

Queen Alexandra, wife of Edward VII, set such a sartorial example that it was said that women across Europe even copied her limp. She popularised many fashions, from choker necklaces to tailored two-piece suits and, in 1901, when a plague of moles was threatening—almost literally—to undermine Balmoral, she ordered a knee-length wrap made of mole fur. The garment caused a sensation. Soon, mole skin (as opposed to moleskin, a cotton fabric that mimics the soft fur) was all the rage. It was used for coats and trousers, to line →

‘In folklore, his underworld life meant he was often attributed magical powers’



House-proud Mole in *The Wind in the Willows* is first encountered cleaning his hole, not as far-fetched an idea as one might imagine

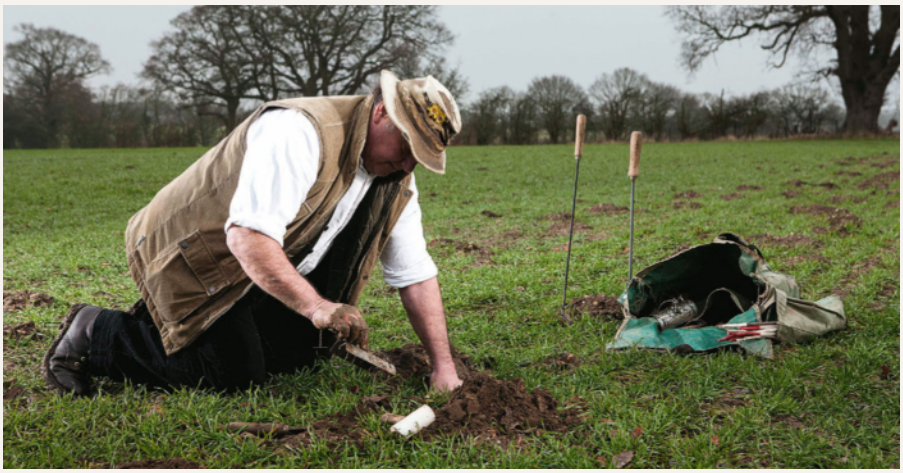
mittens (in one version of his title song, Blackadder wears ‘gloves of finest mole’), for high-grade top hats and as the front for waistcoats.

It takes about 500 moles to make a coat, the tiny pelts cut into rectangles and sewed into plates. The colour of the fur varies from black through dark grey (taupe is French for mole) to lighter grey and tan, so it was usually dyed an inky black. By 1905, British furriers were processing more than a million moles. In 1913, at the peak of the craze, close to four million British skins were exported to the US. Thanks to the fashionable Queen Consort, Balmoral’s mole plague was ended, for a while at least.

If literature celebrated the mole, myth and legend didn’t view him as kindly. Fears of a ‘mouldwarp king’ haunted medieval England. His accession had been predicted by Welsh cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth in the early 12th century. According to the Merlin Prophecies, he would be vainglorious, cowardly, with the whiff of the netherworld about him, and would lead England into the darkness. Accusations of being the mouldwarp monarch dogged Henry IV (Shakespeare alludes to the charge) and were flung at Henry VIII by the northern rebels during the Pilgrimage of Grace.

In folklore, his underworld life meant he was often attributed magical powers. A mole’s paw worn in a bag around your neck was believed to cure cramps and toothache and ward off rheumatism. The creature was also a harbinger of death, popping up beneath the bedroom window of the soon-to-be-departed.

However, he was sometimes viewed as a revolutionary, too—he throws soil at the heavens, after all. A treacherous double-agent, he had a sturdy paw in at least one act of regicide. In 1702, William III’s horse caught a hoof in a molehill, stumbled and threw him. The King’s collarbone was shattered. Bronchitis set in. He died in Kensington Palace a few weeks later. Jacobite supporters of the deposed Stuart Dynasty raised their glasses and gleefully toasted ‘the wee gentleman in the velvet overcoat’ for centuries afterwards.



How to catch a mole

Simon Lester is a retired gamekeeper with 40 years’ experience in controlling moles. ‘People often try homemade remedies to deter moles,’ he explains, ‘Milk bottles sunk in the soil, so the wind blows across the tops of them and whistles, children’s windmills that rattle, tobacco and paprika. All these things work, but only for a short while. The mole gets used to them. If your land is a good place for worms, then he will not stay away for long.’

The poisoning of moles was outlawed in 2006 and, nowadays, trapping them is the only real solution. ‘The mole goes along his hunting tunnels three times a day checking for worms,’ Mr Lester says. ‘You find his underground runs using a dibber. Knowing where to test and when you’ve hit a run comes with experience. You then place your trap—I use barrel traps [as does mole catcher Jeff Nicholls, *above*], although Sussex traps are also popular—in the tunnel. The likelihood is you will catch the mole the same day.’ That usually puts a stop to the trouble. ‘When people see all the soil and mess that has been made, they assume they have an infestation of dozens,’ notes Mr Lester, ‘but it’s generally only a single mole that is the culprit.’

A final word of advice: ‘Don’t pick one up,’ he cautions. ‘They have very sharp teeth and can give you a painful bite.’

Alamy; Getty; Look and Learn/Bridgeman Images; Richard Cannon/Country Life Picture Library