

## Vernal Voles



Photo credit Maine.gov

Late winter/early spring is a terrific time to observe meadow voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*). These small rodents are common in wet grassy areas throughout middle and northern North America. Adults are about 7 inches long, with a tail of 1.25 to 2.5 inches. They have chestnut brown fur with gray bellies. Voles breed year-round, producing 4-6 pups per litter. Pups are weaned after twelve to fourteen days and reach their full adult size at two to ten months. The typical lifespan is less than 16 months.

They are active year-round, but when the snow starts to retreat, the presence of these normally hidden voles becomes most noticeable. During the winter, they dig and eat their way through flattened grasses under the snow, creating squiggly paths. They form nests of woven grass where they sleep and raise their young. As the snow depth decreases, these paths and nests become more visible. For hikers who are extra astute, communal toilet areas can also be seen.



vole shallow tunnels and deep mole tunnel hole  
Photo by RC Grimsley



exposed vole nest  
Photo by RC Grimsley

Voles can cause damage to some human crops, but they are very important in nature. They help to break down plant matter and release the nutrients back to the ecosystem. They help to speed the recovery of fields that have been burned. They are food sources for most raptors and many other birds, including crows, gulls, and some wading birds. Most mammalian predators and some snakes eat them.

As winter yields to spring, go outside and get away from the usual rat race; evidence of the vernal vole race awaits.