



Controlling animals, especially rabbits, on a golf course is a controversial task. Here, two experts on the subject, one a pest controller and the other the director of an animal welfare charity, give their views and, perhaps surprisingly, agree on one thing: many of the methods golf clubs currently deploy are simply not working

Through burrowing and eating the vegetation, rabbits can cause no end of problems for greenkeepers – but controlling them is a very difficult task. Many clubs employ, or allow, people to shoot the animals at night, but this method can be ineffective, cruel and even lead to PR disasters for the golf club. Two experts give their views on what golf clubs can do to minimise the problem.

Gary Mitchell, director, R.E.D. Pest Control – GPS technology is of benefit

The use of technology is nothing new to most of the people involved in golf course management. Some may even be familiar with the concept of satellite mapping.

Several years ago we were approached by a links golf course on the west coast of Scotland, and were asked if we could help with its growing rabbit population that was damaging the course.

Unnoticed digging and scrapings were the most obvious signs but the extensive warren systems the rabbits had built were causing subsidence of greens, bunkers and cart paths.

The greenkeeping staff were having to spend an average of 15 man hours per day just repairing damage to the bunkers.

The client had a local guy coming in at night with a lamp and a gun. But shooting on its own is rarely enough.

To successfully control and manage a rabbit

population, an integrated pest management (IPM) system needs to be employed.

An IPM system looks at not only how to control the rabbits but also studies and takes action to manage the local environmental conditions contributing to the success of the growing rabbit population.

With our client the IPM programme of actions was agreed from the beginning with several key phases identified.

For phase one, we physically walked the course and its boundaries, recording active burrow systems and areas where rabbit damage was occurring.

The GPS satellite mapping system recorded these locations on Google Maps and produced a visual overview map allowing us to plan how to effectively deal with each burrow system.

The GPS mapping programme also highlighted environmental conditions such as large areas of gorse which rabbits were using as cover. This work led to the instigation of a gorse reduction programme which resulted in not only reduced habitat for the rabbits, but also cleared large areas, allowing the regrowth of natural heathers and grasses.

Phase one also allowed us to more accurately estimate the numbers of rabbits populating the course. The system further highlighted areas where rabbits were coming onto the course from neighbouring properties, allowing the team to identify specific areas where rabbit fencing was needed.

We then launched phase two: systematic burrow treatment programmes employing a variety of control methods including gassing of

PR disasters 1 – geese shooting in Worcestershire

Bank House Hotel and Golf Club in Worcestershire faced a PR disaster last year after it shot several geese, which were designated as ‘vermin’.

Worcester News reported that the bodies of at least seven Canada Geese were found floating in a lake ‘just yards’ from the homes of people living nearby.

Local resident Lyn Kirby told the paper she was “sickened” by the killings while dozens of people expressed their anger on the internet. “It takes a special kind of low life to judge geese droppings as unhygienic yet think it is acceptable to leave rotting carcasses floating in the lake,” said one. “Yet another example of human kind killing animals for merely getting in the way,” added another.





Effective rabbit fencing (which goes at least one foot down into the ground). Inset: The damage rabbits can do

burrows and burrow clearing using ferrets and nets.

After each burrow treatment, we carried out further population counts and were able to demonstrate the rabbit population was reducing significantly.

By the end of the treatment programme, the final rabbit population count showed the population had been reduced by almost 75 percent. Our client was delighted with the results, stating they would never have believed how successful this approach would be.

The problem of rabbits on golf courses very often requires a more structured and professional approach than simply employing someone with a gun and a couple of dogs.

Mimi Bekhechi, associate director of PETA – Killing can make the problem worse

Bounding rabbits are a welcome sign that spring is in the air and the golf season has arrived. But the bunnies' taste for plants leaves many

frustrated greenkeepers feeling less than benevolent towards them. Fortunately, there are ways to deter rabbits (see right) that won't cost them their lives or leave you feeling like Carl Spackler in Caddyshack.

Never try to relocate rabbits. They spend most of their short lives within the same 10-acre area, so being relocated confuses them and can cause them to be hit by cars or killed by predators as they try to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings. Relocated rabbits can also have difficulty finding adequate food, water and shelter. And don't help increase the population. Killing wild animals in an attempt to control their population usually backfires. When animals are killed or trapped and forcibly removed from an area, the food supply will spike. And such a spike will attract new animals and prompt them and the survivors to breed at an accelerated rate. So **lethal methods typically serve only to create a frustrating and expensive cycle.** And, of course, those methods don't take into account the rabbits' young. Mother cottontail

Tips on repelling rabbits in gardens

Mimi Bekhechi says you need to make sure that the animals that are causing damage to plants are actually rabbits. Rabbits have upper incisors, so the plants that they have browsed will have a smooth, clean-angled, neatly clipped appearance. Rabbits will also leave pea-sized, light-brown droppings scattered around the area, and are usually active at dawn and dusk.

"The best way to deter rabbits is to make the area undesirable to them," she said.

"Eliminate food sources. Encourage rabbits to find food elsewhere by weeding thoroughly. Cover the remaining plant stems with metal mesh or spray the plants with pepper-based repellents. And maintain a strict course policy against feeding wildlife.

"Scattering mothballs, lavender or catnip around the plants that rabbits enjoy will keep them at bay. To evict the animals, place repellents such as rags soaked with ammonia inside or near the burrows. Rabbits don't like the smell and will leave the area. In less visible areas, you can place statues of dogs or foxes, which may scare them away. Most garden centres or DIY shops also sell electronic repellents. These solar-powered devices slide easily into the ground and emit sounds, vibrations and flashing lights which deter animals both above and below ground."

However, Gary Mitchell disagrees. "I've tried all of the methods PETA advise in the last 15 years," he said, "and, unfortunately, they do not work. I've even seen animals sitting on the statues that are meant to frighten them away!"

PR disasters 2 – dog shot at Hampshire course

Marriott Meon Valley in Hampshire suspended pest control measures after a family dog was shot dead on its golf course last autumn.

Four-year-old whippet Wilma was mistaken for a rabbit.

The hotel apologised to the dog's owner, John Kirby, but he criticised the golf club and his comments were reported throughout the national media.

"Anyone in charge of a high-powered rifle should be more aware of their surroundings and be 100 percent sure about what they're shooting at, which they blatantly weren't," he said. The outcry even resulted in a police investigation into the incident.

rabbits may return to their nests in order to feed their babies only twice a day, at dawn and dusk, because it decreases the chances of alerting predators to the nest's location. If the mother is trapped or killed while she is out gathering food, her babies will almost certainly starve to death.

Making your course unattractive to rabbits and removing their food supply will encourage them to move on and raise their families elsewhere. These methods will save you time and money – and also save rabbits' lives.