

Revival of the traditional

molecatcher



TEAMWORK Molecatcher Brian Alderton and his dog Mizzel

TRADITIONAL molecatching may be considered a dying trade but demand for practitioners - and training to become a molecatcher - is on the up.

Places on a course run in Northumberland at the start of the month were quickly snapped up with would-be traditional molecatchers travelling from as far away as Kent, Cumbria and Scotland to take part.

The event, which was held at Lee Moor Business Park near Alnwick, was the furthest north that trainers from the British Traditional Molecatchers Register (BTMR) have travelled to put on a course.

Iain Brown, from Lee Moor, contacted the BTMR because of interest locally and was able to source some funding from sector skills body Lantra. He hopes to stage another event shortly due to the demand.

"A friend of mine said his son wanted to do a molecatchers' course but the furthest they go is Hull," said Mr Brown.

"We invited them up and the course was full. It was put on at relatively short notice. We'd be very keen to get the organisers back up.

"The trainees get properly accredited and it ends in the practical laying of traps and coming back to get the moles."

The land at Lee Moor, which is also a working farm and grows trees for en-

ONCE upon a time, molecatchers were a common sight travelling between farms and estates carrying out their craft. But what many think is a disappearing trade is now enjoying a renaissance after the poison used during the 20th Century to control "the little gentleman in black velvet" was banned. **KAREN DENT** discovers more.

ergy crops, had plenty of moles for the trainees to get to grips with.

"It seems to be getting more of an issue. The molehills are quite small but we were getting giant molehills in our woods. It is literally a mole headquar-

ters," said Mr Brown. "The tunnels join up and they have an uber-molehill. It was reassuring to find out that we just had standard-sized moles.

"The moles here had not been dealt with for four or five years. They stood no chance!"

There has been a boom in the mole population and the demand for traditional molecatching has also soared since people were banned from using the poison strychnine on their land four years ago.

Many of the pest control companies which were called in to carry out the work no longer do so since the poison was banned and some use aluminium phosphate, which kills the mole underground.

The change in the law surrounding strychnine was the catalyst for the formation of the BTMR by Brian Alderton in 2007. Mr Alderton, who led the course at Lee Moor, has been in the

business for 12 years and has been training others in the art for two-and-a-half years.

The Yorkshire-based organisation, which is an accredited Lantra training body, has more than 300 members and 250 approved and registered traditional molecatchers.

"With the banning of strychnine and the fact people couldn't find a traditional molecatcher, it has just gone from strength to strength," said Mr Alderton, who is based in Ripon, North Yorkshire, and deals with around 900 clients on the books of his business Mole Control.

"A traditional molecatcher does not use any poison or gases. He goes out and sets traps skillfully where the moles are working and catches them in as humane a way as possible.

"Since the banning of strychnine in 2006, farmers couldn't get hold of it and they haven't the time to trap the

moles or the skill to do so. Also during the foot and mouth outbreak, people weren't allowed to work on the land, so the mole population has risen tremendously.

"When I came up there around the Newcastle area, the amount of molehills was tremendous."

The growing interest in learning the skill and becoming an accredited molecatcher from people around the UK has persuaded Mr Alderton to increase his course's geographical reach.

"We basically really only did around Doncaster but when we are approached, we say yes, if you can get 10 people or will pay part of the cost," he said.

"So far, every course we have done has been fully subscribed. The April course in Doncaster is fully subscribed and the May course has nine people already."

Moles cause many more problems

that simply making a mess of manicured lawns.

Mr Alderton said: "They cause tremendous damage in pasture, particularly for farmers who want to cut grass for silage.

"The animals can get listeria ... there are contaminations in the soil that are always there. It is a loss of pasture as well.

"There is also the cost of the damage when people can trip up and hurt themselves and you are responsible for public liability."

Iain Brown, who is now aiming to run a traditional rabbit-catching course at Lee Moor, also pointed to the problems of stones being brought to the surface and damaging machinery.

He said: "Most of it is the practicality. It's mainly the disruptiveness and it's unsightly.

"There are plenty of moles; we need more people out there doing it."

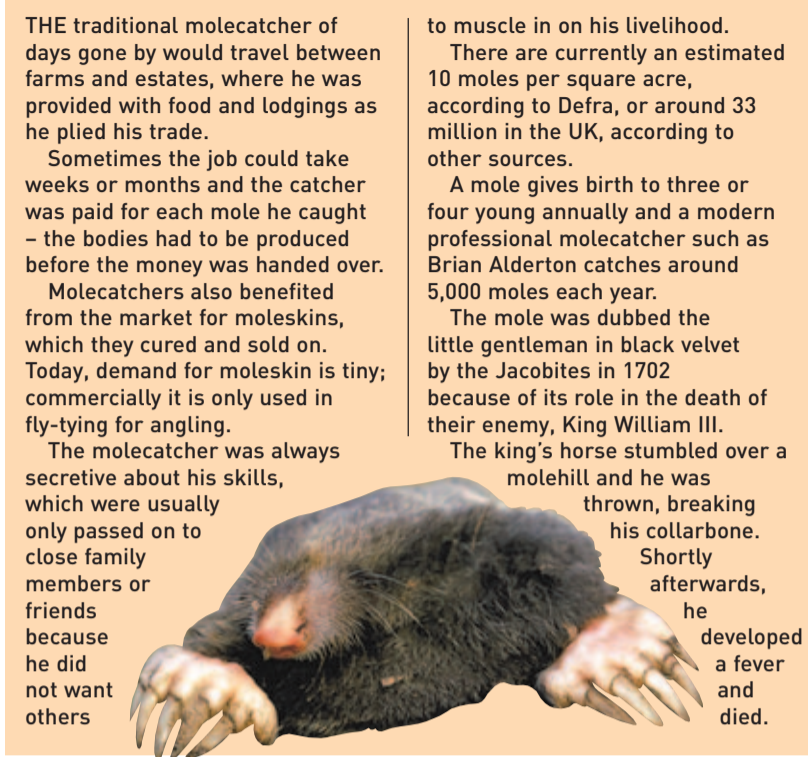
to muscle in on his livelihood. There are currently an estimated 10 moles per square acre, according to Defra, or around 33 million in the UK, according to other sources.

A mole gives birth to three or four young annually and a modern professional molecatcher such as Brian Alderton catches around 5,000 moles each year.

The mole was dubbed the little gentleman in black velvet by the Jacobites in 1702 because of its role in the death of their enemy, King William III.

The king's horse stumbled over a molehill and he was thrown, breaking his collarbone. Shortly afterwards, he developed a fever and died.

THE LITTLE GENTLEMAN IN VELVET



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