

NORTHERN POCKET GOPHERS ABOVE GROUND IN WINTER

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The Northern Pocket Gopher (*Thomomys talpoides*) is known to disperse 1 km and swim 300 m, but is seldom seen above ground in summer, let alone in winter.⁴ Wrigley, for example, noted: "I have never seen an untrapped pocket gopher running around on the surface, but one half-frozen individual was brought in by a farmer who had found it lost and wandering through the snow. Its tail was cut, suggesting it had been forced out of its burrow by another gopher."³ Thus, accidentally finding two on top of the snow on one cold day in winter was completely unexpected.

On the morning of Tuesday, 12 November 1991, Ken De Smet and I crossed a largely snow-covered alfalfa field near Bruxelles in southwestern Manitoba. We both noticed large concentrations of Coyote tracks in the area and two Coyotes were observed there. Ken was surprised to see a Northern Pocket Gopher scurrying around on top of the snow. Winter had arrived there on 22 October when about 24 cm of snow fell and the temperature dropped to near -15°C . The temperature was near -10°C the morning we were there. The gopher had swollen toes and appeared disoriented. It was aggressive when approached, standing on its back legs, jumping and squeaking. When I crossed the other end of the field some 300 m to the north, I too saw a pocket gopher on top of the snow. It was in a similar state with swollen toes and an aggressive disposition. We took pictures of it and left it.

Why were these animals on top of

the ground? Indeed, snow covered the ground prior to freeze-up and fresh pocket gopher diggings were evident under the snow in many areas. Both animals were seen on largely snow-free hill tops where the ground was surely frozen to some depth. It appeared that considerable rain had fallen just prior to the snowfall and that the pocket gophers were in search of higher, drier ground. Once out where the ground was not frozen, it was impossible for them to penetrate the frost zone on the bare hills.

How commonly pocket gophers are caught above ground after freeze-up is unknown, but it appeared that the Coyote population was well aware of the phenomenon prior to our discovering it. Seton describes taking a pocket gopher from a white owl on 12 April so the pocket gophers likely emerge early in the spring.² Their digging activity in and under the snow was mentioned and illustrated by Seton and others, including Criddle.^{1,2}

1. CRIDDLE, S. 1930. The prairie pocket gopher *Thomomys talpoides*. *J. of Mammalogy* 11:265-280.
2. SETON, E.E.T. 1909. Life histories of northern animals. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. pp. 561-586.
3. WRIGLEY, R.E., W.B. PRESTON, W.W.R. COPLAND, D.E. MCINNES and J. E. DUBOIS. 1974. Animals of Manitoba. Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature. Winnipeg, Manitoba. p. 10.
4. WRIGLEY, R.E. 1986. Mammals in North America. Hyperion Press, Winnipeg. p. 228.