



Linda Seeger/The Arizona Republic
A gopher's worst nightmare: Sandy Felts and son Brandon at work.

THE ONLY GOOD GOPHER...

Rodent trapper stalks yard-destroying vermin

By Thomas Ropp
The Arizona Republic

Forget the rakish gophers in *Caddyshack*. They're mechanical. They're movie gophers. Real gophers, according to Sandy Felts, have absolutely no redeeming qualities.

Her hands and forearms are scarred, cut, burned and bruised from real gophers. But then, she and pocket gophers have been strange yardfellows for a long time.

Felts, a professional gopher exterminator, is president of Gopher Getters Inc. (Phone: 278-9525). She and her employees only do gophers.

Felts learned her profession from her father while she was growing up on a farm in Gila Bend. "He paid me 25 cents a tail," she said. "I had to put them in jars."

At the age of 4, she stuck her arm down a gopher hole and learned something else. Gophers bite. Bad.

"I nearly lost my thumb," Felts said. "People think they only have four teeth. But they actually have twenty more in the center of their mouth that grind rocks into nothing. When they latch on, they don't let go." She's been trying to equal the score ever since.

Felts' ability to recognize the scent of gopher urine has been a key to her success as a gopher trapper. In fact, she can even distinguish male from female urine.

She picks up the scent by poking a screwdriver in the ground and smelling the dirt.

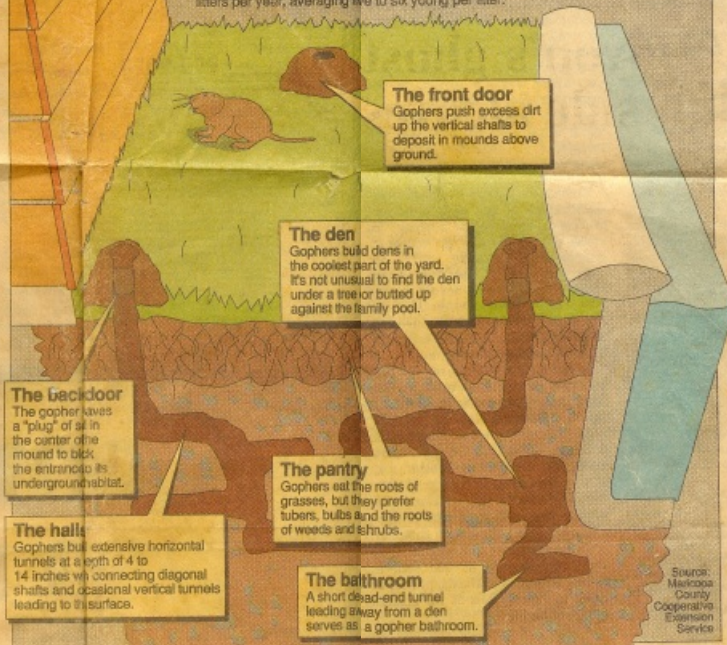
"Males have real potent urine," Felts said. "They mark their tunnels."

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At home in your yard

A gopher's 'floor plan'

The most common gopher in the Valley is the pocket gopher. A mature gopher measures between 7 and 10 inches from head to tail, and has a wide head, very small ears and tiny eyes. Fur color ranges from pale to dark brown. Gophers have enlarged front feet with long claws suited for digging, and long upper and lower front teeth suited for gnawing on roots and tubers. In the Valley, gophers breed throughout the year. A female may bear up to three litters per year, averaging five to six young per litter.



Source:
Maricopa
County
Cooperative
Extension
Service

Illustration by Don Foley/The Arizona Republic

Hunting gophers by the numbers



1.

The hunter sniffs her screwdriver to determine whether prey is near and whether it's a boy or girl.



2.

Having determined that gophers are near, she digs a hole in which to place a trap.



3.

The hole dug, she sets the trap to nab the nasty critters in the act of destroying someone's yard.

Gophers get the goat of exterminator

— GOPHERS, from page S8

can carry innumerable diseases, ranging from rabies to bubonic plague.

"They're also extremely destructive. They don't just stop at eating foliage. They eat through electrical wiring, PVC pipes, they crack roads and come up through foundations and pools."

Felts admits that when people find out what she does for a living they often take an immediate dislike to her. She said she was at the zoo once with her two sons and husband, looking at the prairie dogs, when she was attacked by a woman who had been taking photos.

"I made the mistake of wearing my Gopher Getters shirt, and the woman just started hitting me."

She has nothing against prairie dogs, she said.

Getting pounded by strangers is one of the lows of her profession. Another unpleasant aspect is the element of surprise when digging around open holes.

"You never know what's hiding in those holes."

She once pulled out what she thinks was a 3-foot Norwegian rat. Another time a rattlesnake with bared fangs came out of a hole after her.

"I have nightmares about the snake."

On the plus side, Felts said that pocket gophers sometimes carry little treasures in their pocketlike cheeks. She's found rings and old coins in their mouths.

"I even found a silver dollar once."

Felts believes the city's worst gopher-infested area is from 19th Avenue to 16th Street and between Camelback Road and Peoria Ave.

"That area is bad, because it used to be orchards and dairies years ago."

Gophers are everywhere, however, and they prefer lush back yards to desert landscaping, she said.

Gopher Getters officially went into business last April. Needless to say, they've been busy. Felts sometimes has as many as eight clients a day.

She charges \$110 for the first visit, then \$10 for each gopher she traps.

"We'll show you the gophers."

If you *really* want to see them.

Tunnelers embrace life of loner

Pocket Gophers normally spend their entire lives in the soil, except when feeding above ground or gnawing their way into someone's pool.

Gophers can swim.

They build extensive horizontal tunnel systems with connecting diagonal shafts and occasional vertical tunnels leading to the surface.

Gophers like to build their dens in the coolest part of a yard. It's not unusual to find the dens under a tree or butted up against a pool. A short dead-end tunnel leading away from a den serves as a gopher bathroom.

They dig with powerful front feet and push excess dirt up the vertical shafts to deposit in mounds above ground. After depositing its load of fresh soil, the gopher leaves a characteristic "plug" of soil in the center of the mound to block the entrance to its underground habitat.

According to the Maricopa County Cooperative Extension's bulletin *The Pocket Gopher in Arizona*, gophers usually live alone in a one-tunnel system, but the young may remain in a female's habitat for a short time after leaving the nest.

The tunnels are normally as wide as the community's dominant male, who acts as a kind of furry auger, chomping and digging new passages.

In the Valley and other lower elevations, gophers breed throughout the year. A female may bear up to three litters per year, averaging five to six young per litter.

The young remain in the den for several weeks after birth, but eventually leave the parent's tunnel system to establish an independent life.

Mature gophers measure between seven and 10 inches from head to tail. They're normally heavy-bodied with a wide head, very small ears and tiny eyes. The color of their fur ranges from pale to dark brown.

"They have enlarged front feet with long claws suited for digging," John Stair of the county extension said. "Their long upper and lower front teeth are suited for gnawing on roots and tubers."

An external, fur-lined pocket opens forward on each cheek and will extend when the mouth is closed.

The tail has sparse tactile hairs that enable the gopher to feel its way when moving backward in a tunnel.

Arizona has three species of Pocket Gopher; the most common is the Valley Pocket Gopher.

Gopher trapper Sandy Felts said she sometimes comes across a darker, furrer variety called a Tucú-tucú, and she now believes she's discovered a new type, a hybrid between the Tucú-tucú and the Valley Pocket Gopher.

"It's a new animal," Felts said. "It has multishaded bands of fur and is real furry, except for the tail."

She's keeping it in her freezer for positive identification.