Burrowing Animal Holes and the Rules of Golf: What Qualifies & Relief

Brent Kelley – Golf Expert
http://golf.about.com/cs/rulesofgolf/g/rules_burrowing.htm?utm_content=20160324&utm_medium=email&utm_source=exp_nl&utm_campaign=list_golf&utm_term=list_golf

Updated February 29, 2016.

A “burrowing animal” is an animal that digs a hole or tunnel into the ground for the purposes of shelter or to more safely get from one place to another. Gophers, thanks to Caddyshack, are probably the best-known burrowing animals to golfers.

But what do burrowing animals have to do with golf, and why are we bothering to write about them?

Because under the Rules of Golf, "holes, casts and runways" on a golf course made by burrowing animals are classified as abnormal ground conditions. Which means that the rules tell us how to proceed if our golf ball happens to roll into or onto one of those holes.

Official Rule Book Definition of 'Burrowing Animal'

The official Rules of Golf are written by the USGA and the R&A, and the definition of "burrowing animal" that appears in the rules is this:

"A 'burrowing animal' is an animal (other than a worm, insect or the like) that makes a hole for habitation or shelter, such as a rabbit, mole, groundhog, gopher or salamander.

"Note: A hole made by a non-burrowing animal, such as a dog, is not an abnormal ground condition unless marked or declared as ground under repair."

So the definition gives several specific examples of burrowing animals, and also several examples of animals that don’t qualify.

In addition:

• Decision 25-19.5 states that footprints made by burrowing animals are not included in the definition.

• Decision 25/23 clarifies that molehills are included.

• Ant hills, however, are considered loose impediments, not abnormal ground conditions, according to Decision 23/5. (Ants are insects, which are excluded from the definition of burrowing animal. However, there are circumstances when ant hills, according to Decision 33-8/22, can be classified as ground under repair via a local rule.)

(See Decisions on Rule 25 on usga.org or randa.org for these specific decisions.)

What Happens If You Hit Your Ball Into a Burrowing Animal Hole?

Burrowing animal holes, casts or runways are abnormal ground conditions, and Rule 25-1a tells us when interference from an abnormal ground condition exists:

"Interference by an abnormal ground condition occurs when a ball lies in or touches the condition or when the condition interferes with the player’s stance or the area of his intended swing."
"If the player's ball lies on the putting green, interference also occurs if an abnormal ground condition on the putting green intervenes on his line of putt. Otherwise, intervention on the line of play is not, of itself, interference under this Rule."

A note to that rule says, however, that the Committee can implement a Local Rule stating that interference with a golfer's stance is not, in itself, interference. Such a local rule, if in place, should be communicated to participants in a competition, or listed on a golf course's scorecard.

Rule 25-2b covers relief from abnormal ground conditions, and relief is usually without penalty. The exception is if a golfer's ball is inside a bunker and the golfer drops outside the bunker, which carries a 1-stroke penalty.

Otherwise, if you are taking relief from, say, a gopher hole, you lift and drop the ball within one club-length of the nearest point of relief; or, on the putting green, place the ball within one club-length of the nearest point of relief.

Free relief does not apply to golf balls in water hazards, even if they have interference from a burrowing animal hole.

**What If Your Ball Goes Down a Burrowing Animal Hole and Disappears?**

Darn the luck! Your golf ball just rolled into a burrowing animal hole and disappeared. Is that a lost ball? Do you get free relief or is there a penalty?

Rule 25-1c states that "it must be known or virtually certain that the ball is in" the burrowing animal hole. If you are not sure, you must treat it as a lost ball and proceed under Rule 27-1.

However, if it is "known or virtually certain" that ball you can't find disappeared down a burrowing animal hole, you can substitute another ball without penalty and take relief as described above. The exception is if the ball disappeared after crossing a water hazard boundary, which rules out free relief.

Be sure to read Rule 25-1, linked multiple times above, which goes into the specific scenarios mentioned here, along with relief options for each.