

Pocket Gopher Visits Bird Feeder, Eats Seeds!

In the past few weeks I've wondered what kind of critter has been terraforming the ground underneath the bird feeders. I swear that the area looks like NASA photos of the uneven terrain of Mars, or maybe Death Valley or a miniature version of the Grand Canyon. One day the sand is mounded up and the next it's all sunk in and decidedly odd-looking.

Now, I've see quite a few different critters visiting the bird feeders—over and above birds, of course—including Fox Squirrels, Raccoons, Possums, White-Footed and Deer Mice and even Eastern Wood Rats, in the past 10 years. I've also assumed, based on tiny burrow openings, generally less than 1 inch in diameter, under the feeders with shallow tunnels that often collapse when I step on them, that we have Woodland Voles, Eastern Moles or possibly even Least Shrews, though I've never seen one of them.

But I never expected—though perhaps I should have since they're so common and seemingly intent on trying to bury the house and the RV—pocket gophers! I was watching the birds at the feeders just before Christmas when I noticed movement on the ground. Expecting a Chipping or White-



*A Attwater's Pocket Gopher, *Geomys attwateri*, feeding on seeds under one of the bird feeders at the Biology Station on Christmas morning. It wasn't the present I was expecting but I'll take it just the same.*

Throated Sparrow, I was surprised to see a fairly large hole, about 3 inches in size, in one of the depressions, and then this big rodent

sticks its head out, grabs a seed off the ground (birds are messy eaters that cause no end of problems by attracting squirrels and

other "feeder cleaners"!), and disappears back down the hole.

Sure enough, it was a Attwater's Pocket Gopher, *Geomys attwateri*, which we always call (for obvious reason), "Gopher Pyle." If you can picture one of those mechanical coin banks—I had one with a Halloween theme at one time, shaped like a coffin, you put a coin on a particular spot, and out comes this vampire hand that drags the coin down into the coffin—then you've got a pretty good idea of how the gopher was getting the seeds.

I never saw more than one-half of its body—the front half, of course (I've yet to see the hind end of a pocket gopher and maybe that's a good thing since the front end is so butt-ugly)—as it stretched itself out to snatch a seed and then, quick as a wink, disappearing back beneath the ground. It does pretty much the same thing when it's evacuating its tunnels and creating its characteristic trail-of-mounds-of-dirt but this time there was no above ground mound—just a hole in the ground and a gopher in it.

The most interesting thing about it all, I think, is that Pocket Gophers seem to like bird seed! Who knew?!?