



THE ALISAL  
Guest Ranch and Resort

## *River Course Men's Club*

8/25/2023

### **Clarifying Relief from Animal Holes**

Prior to our last tournament, we fielded a great question from a member who asked us to clarify when we can take free relief from animal damage to the course. Unfortunately, we didn't have time to research it in time to make any announcement at the tournament, but since then our handicap chairman Jim Sobell has consulted with our USGA rules representative to settle the matter.

We do have lots of gopher holes on our course, and some of that damage exists in closely mown grass which is unfortunate. Rule 16 in the Rules of Golf covers abnormal course conditions, and animal holes are included in that rule. Golfers will get free relief from animal holes as defined below:

#### **Animal Hole**

Any hole dug in the ground by an animal, except for holes dug by animals that are also defined as loose impediments (such as worms or insects). The term "animal hole" includes:

- The loose material the animal dug out of the hole,
- Any worn-down track or trail leading into the hole, and
- Any area on the ground pushed up or altered as a result of the animal digging the hole underground.

An animal hole does not include animal footprints that are not part of a worn-down track or trail leading into an animal hole.

This definition is still unsatisfying though, because distinguishing animal holes from other damage is difficult, such as illustrated in the photos below. The photo on the left shows a small pile of loose dirt (top right) adjacent to a flat area of bare dirt with tire tracks. Are these animal holes? Do we get free relief from either or both? The photo on the right shows a slightly different situation where it looks like the damage was once an animal hole, but has started to grow over with grass again. Our USGA rep stated that "unless the dirt and sand materials are still loose" it is not an animal hole. By his interpretation, a golfer would only get free relief from the pile of loose dirt in the left photo. That may seem unfair; however, that is the interpretation we got from this rules official.



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Likewise, these photos above illustrate other examples. The loose piles on the left are clearly within the definition provided in Rule 16, while the bare patch in the top of the right photo does not. The splotchy grass shown below that is clearly not within the definition of an animal hole; though there are plenty of these types of areas on our course as well, such as right where my balls lands in the #7 fairway when I hit a decent drive. It doesn't seem fair, but this is hardly different from many other situations in golf, such as coming to rest in a divot!

When taking relief, the golfer must take "full relief" from the abnormal condition. You do that by first determining the nearest point of relief, where the condition no longer obstructs your stance or swing. Mark that with a tee, and then drop within one club length of the tee no closer to the hole.

The USGA pro clarified the rule for us, and also stated that our club's Rules Committee has the prerogative to contemplate local rules. This requires consultation with the head professional, as the local rules decisions ultimately lie with him. As a Board, we always welcome input from our members because we are here for you. So, if a member comes to us with an idea or proposal, we will most certainly make that a priority agenda item for the next Board meeting. If you have ideas on how to mitigate the existing damage on our course with an appropriate local rule, please take time to write to us.

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