

Lizards 1: the slow worm



There are around 5000 species of lizards in the world but only three are native to mainland Britain and only two occur in and around our parishes. One is far more widespread and is found regularly in gardens – indeed, this lizard is perhaps the gardener’s best ally against slugs.

The slow worm, *anguis fragilis*, is a legless lizard that thrives in the wilder edges of gardens. It is found in a variety of habitats throughout Britain but is most common in the south and east of England.

Surprisingly often mistaken for a snake, adult slow worms reach 30–45cm in length and can be distinguished from snakes by their visible eyelids and broad, flat tongue. They can be long-lived – up to 30 years in the wild and a record 54 in captivity.

Adults have a smooth, shiny appearance and exhibit a wide colour variation. They are sexually dimorphic: males are typically uniform grey or grey-brown with a steel grey underside and occasional blue spots on their upper body; females have a brown back, which can be any shade from gold to deep copper, with darker flanks and black underside and an occasional thin black vertebral line.

Like all British reptiles, the slow worm requires the warmth of the sun to gain the energy it needs to hunt and is therefore mostly diurnal, but evidence suggests that hunting continues on warm nights, when its favoured prey, the slug, is most active. Slow worms emerge from hibernation in March and courtship, which may last as long as 10 hours, takes place between mid-May and late June. Territorial disputes between males are usually settled by scent but they will occasionally fight each other for possession of females. Most females tend to mate once every two years in Britain and produce an average of eight live young from 70–100mm in length, although they can produce up to 25 (depending on the size of the female). Initially encased in an egg membrane, the young quickly break free and will be fully grown in 6–8 years and sexually mature in about four.

The slow worm has adapted well to our urbanised modern Britain. It can be found in most large cities and readily uses railway embankments as movement corridors. Like a lot of wildlife, it favours brown field sites, which makes it vulnerable to industrial and housing development.

Slow worms have many natural predators including corvids, birds of prey, woodpeckers, badgers and hedgehogs. However we introduced its two greatest threats – the pheasant and the domestic cat, high numbers of which can lead to local population extinctions.

So if you wish to provide a home for ‘the gardener’s friend’ to help against the slugs and snails, there are some simple steps that will benefit slow worms. Avoid metaldehyde-based slug pellets – as well as harming wildlife, they kill cats and dogs. Leave some longer grass areas at least until November, when slow worms will be hibernating. Create somewhere dry and frost-free for them to hibernate – a log pile or small length of dry stone wall or, best of all, a functioning compost heap.

Jon Wood
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