

# Slow Worms in Worcester

## Appearance

Despite resembling snakes slow worms are in fact legless lizards. Unlike snakes they have eyelids and external ears and a blunt not forked tongue.

When in their first or second year they are gold above and black below and superbly camouflaged against dead grass. In their third year they begin to develop adult colouration when males and females can be identified. The females have dark sides and belly while the male is paler and usually has a blue belly. Colour can vary from silver-grey to copper and some males are found with blue spots. The head of the male is larger but there is little other difference in size between the sexes. At maturity they can grow to a length of 21 inches.

## Life history

The slow worm gives birth to live young, retaining the eggs within the female's body until laying whereupon the membrane ruptures and a fully developed youngster emerges. They can live for up to 20 years.

They hibernate in the soil or more often in compost heaps and are often found coiled together in knotted clumps from October until March when they emerge to feed and breed. Birth occurs in August and September and the young are independent immediately - 6 to 12 is the average litter.

When uncovered, slow worms usually lie motionless and depend on their camouflage whereas snakes usually make off rapidly. All reptiles are cold-blooded and rely on the sun to warm them up. Lying under tin sheets or old carpet keeps them warm and hides them from predators but they may be seen in the open on flat stones or bare earth.

Their enemies include hedgehogs, rats, foxes and cats; smaller ones are taken by magpies, blackbirds and even chickens. When grabbed by the tail it often breaks off and continues wriggling as a distraction while the lizard makes its escape; another tail is grown eventually.

## Habitat

The preferred habitat is hedgerows, woods and gardens with long rough grass and plenty of cover such as log piles, brick rubble or heaps of leaves.

## Slow Worms in Worcester

**The City of Worcester has a very large population of slow worms and could lay claim to be the most important city in Britain for this shy reptile.** Recent survey work has shown that the abundance of green spaces such as Local Nature Reserves and allotments hold good numbers of what is becoming a scarce creature. In fact they can be found within 50 yards of Shrub Hill Station!

**In Worcester, the stronghold of the slow worm is the City's allotments,** especially where abandoned and overgrown plots sit next to tidier ones. The long vegetation gives cover whereas the neater plot provides a hunting ground when they emerge at dusk.

## Friend or foe?

Slow worms are completely harmless to man, or any other creature, apart from slugs and other soft bodied prey such as worms, spiders or beetles.

With its diet of slugs the slow worm is generally held to be the gardener's friend and it is particularly fond of the small white slug, which is found on lettuces. A male slow worm was seen to eat 17 slugs one after the other before sliding back into its hiding place 20 minutes later! They will also eat snails and have been observed sucking them out of their shells but only small snails seem to be tackled in this way.

## What you can do to conserve them

Well, firstly and most obviously don't kill them on sight. It is a good idea not to pick them up as they might empty their bowels in fright! Also if picked up by their tail, like most lizards, they will drop them, leaving the tail in your hand. This will regrow, but is obviously best to avoid it.

Try to provide a little area of rough grass with a sheet of tin, board, piece of carpet or roofing felt for them to shelter under. Many people who use carpet for mulching unwittingly provide this shelter anyway - and don't be too fussy about moving bits of old rubble, etc. from the unused parts of your plot.

Be careful when digging or disturbing compost heaps during the hibernation period. Dump old weeds in a heap on the disused plot next door; it is not irresponsible if nobody's cultivating it.

Finally, if at all possible, avoid the use of slug pellets and find a cheaper way of control such as beer traps. With luck, the slow worms will control any surplus.

Remember, we share this planet with a wealth of wildlife and we all have a responsibility in protecting it. Worcester has nationally important numbers of slow worms and we can keep it that way with very little effort. The greater countryside is becoming more intensively farmed or being built on and the little pockets of green space in towns, like you allotment, are becoming more and more important.