

LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

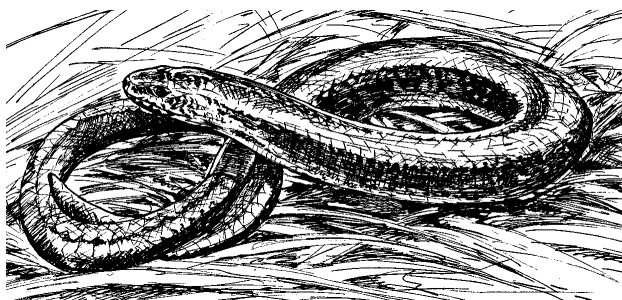
Registered Charity No. 1089466

Slowworm (*Anguis fragilis*)

FACT SHEET No. 9

Recognition

Adults: usually to about 30 cm, although exceptionally up to 50 cm. Slowworms are legless lizards which can be distinguished from snakes by their smaller size and the presence of moveable eyelids.



They have a highly polished, smooth appearance to the body, often a uniform grey or pinkish colour in males and a darker bronze with black flanks and underside in females. Occasionally males may have blue spots on the anterior part of the body. Babies approximately 7 cm and a striking golden colour, with dark sides and vertebral stripe.

Status & Distribution

Slowworms are found throughout England, Wales and Scotland, with a recent discovery in The Burren, Ireland, which is the result of an introduction. They are progressively more common towards the south and west of England but local "hotspots" of distribution may occur anywhere with suitable habitat.

Slowworms can be found in rough grassland and scrub habitats but may also be common in suburban areas in man-made environments, such as road and rail embankments, allotments and cemeteries.

General Ecology

The slowworm differs from the legged lizards in many ways. It is rarely found basking in the open, except in early spring when they first emerge from hibernation and in late summer when gravid females expose themselves to the rays of the sun directly.

For the rest of the active part of the year, they remain concealed in grassy vegetation and the litter layer of the soil, where they feed on slow-moving invertebrates, such as caterpillars, larvae, worms and especially slugs. They can be found under a variety of sun-warmed objects.

Mating occurs in late spring and fighting may occur between males, with much biting and writhing of bodies. Females give birth to about a dozen live young in September of the same season or, more likely, the following year.

Slowworms have many predators, including birds, cats and other mammals. Apart from their cryptic behaviour, slowworms have few defences although, like our other native lizards, they can shed their tails to distract predators. Individuals that have lost their tails appear truncated, as they re-grow very poorly.

Conservation

The slowworm is protected from killing and injuring under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended) and still appears common in some parts of the country. It is also the reptile that survives best in urbanised areas because of its secretive nature and need for relatively small areas of habitat.

Its cryptic behaviour often causes slowworms to be overlooked and many populations are no doubt destroyed because of a lack of awareness of their presence, despite the legal protection they receive. They can be particularly vulnerable when disused land of little obvious wildlife value, such as former allotments and “brown-field” sites, are developed.

Frequent Questions

What can I do to help slowworms?

Any site which might have slowworms should be investigated so that animals are not lost through ignorance should an area be proposed for development. Placing artificial refugia, such as metal sheets or roofing felt, can reveal the presence of slowworms. Always try to keep these materials away from public view and remove them from the site as soon as a record is obtained. This will minimise any losses to collection or persecution and, of course, always send details of any record to your county Amphibian & Reptile Group.

Further Information

Lizards of the British Isles	P. Stafford	Shire Publications
Snakes and lizards	T. Langton	Whittet Books
Reptiles and amphibians in Britain	D. Frazer	Collins New Naturalist