

Lavant Horticultural Society

Slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*)



From its name you would expect it to be a worm, whereas it looks more like a small snake. In fact, it is neither – it is a lizard that in the course of evolution has lost its legs.

Adult slow-worms are about 30 – 40 cm long. They are covered in very smooth, small scales, which gives them a shiny appearance. The male is a uniform brownish grey (although older males may sport some bluish spots), whereas the female and all juveniles are browner with darker sides and a thin darker stripe along the middle of the back. The head merges

smoothly into the cylindrical body, which tapers only slightly towards the tail, without the narrowing behind the head that gives snakes their typical 'neck'.

Again unlike snakes, the slow-worm has eyelids. It can also shed its tail if it feels threatened – the shed tail thrashes around to distract the predator, whilst the slow-worm makes its get-away. It may then regrow its tail, but not to the full extent of the original one.

The slow-worm hibernates from late October to late February or early March, depending on climatic conditions. Compost heaps are favourite sites for hibernation, but piles of leaves or loose soil may also be used. If you disturb a hibernating slow-worm make sure you leave it as you found it. It prefers places with some insulation from the cold where it will also be hidden from predators.

Slow-worms are often found in gardens and allotments, particularly in neglected corners where they are least disturbed by humans. However, they are not readily seen. Being cold-blooded, they rely upon the ambient conditions to raise their body temperature; they like basking in the sun, but only where there is sufficient cover, not in the open. Warming up like this is essential to survival – if their body temperature is too low they move very sluggishly, making it more difficult to avoid predators. They will emerge to forage at dusk or after rain, but always keeping close to places where they can quickly find refuge, such as under bits of corrugated metal sheeting or logs or stones that trap the heat of the sun.

Slow-worms are fed on slugs, worms, spiders and various insects. In their turn, slow-worms are also prey for a wide range of predators, including many species of birds, hedgehogs, badgers, foxes and also domestic cats.

The slow-worm is ovo-viviparous, i.e. it does lay eggs, but the young hatch as soon as the eggs are laid or very shortly afterwards. They are miniature versions of the adults, about 7-9 cm long, and are independent straight away. By two years of age they should be about 21-23 cm long. They can live for about 20 years if they escape predation.

Slow-worms are a protected species in the UK and it is illegal to intentionally kill or injure slow-worms or to trade in them.

They are very useful in the garden as small slugs form the main part of their diet, so if you come across a slow-worm treat it carefully, causing it the least possible disturbance. With luck and some overgrown places to provide shelter, you could have an increasing number of slow-worms and fewer slugs.

