Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SLOW WORM
(Anguis fragilis)

Z24



The slow worm's scientific Latin name is *Anguis fragilis*, which means 'fragile snake'. This refers to the animal's ability to shed the end of its tail when attacked. The shed tail will continue to wriggle after being cast off in order to distract predators while the slow worm escapes. This is a trick which is shared with geckos, skinks and other lizards - but not with snakes. Despite the Latin name - and despite the nervousness of many people - slow worms are **not** snakes and are entirely harmless. The other indication that a slow worm is not a snake is that they have small eyes with eyelids that blink (if you can get close enough to stare into the slow worm's eyes!). Snakes never blink.



The slow worm is one of several lizards which has evolved a legless body. Other legless lizards include many species of glass lizard, though a few of these have small stub-like legs. A photograph of a European glass lizard or scheltopusik (*Ophisaurus apodus*) can be seen on the left. Glass lizards get their name because, like the slow worm, they can break into separate pieces.

Limbs are thought to have developed when animals moved from life in water to life on land - it's difficult to move on land without legs! However, some creatures have subsequently learned to survive on land without limbs, particularly those who look for food in tight places, such as crevices, soil and sand. As species lose their limbs, they generally become longer and thinner. This is because the body is more important for locomotion than the limbs and a long, thin body provides more wriggle than a short stumpy one.

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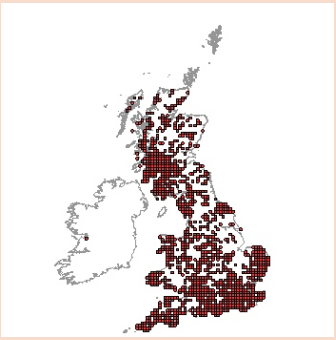
Lizards are often associated with basking in the sun. The common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara* - see photograph on right), which is widespread across the British Isles, can often be seen doing this. The slow worm, on the other hand, is much more secretive. In hot weather it will bury itself in the soil or hide under stones, planks of wood or sheets of corrugated iron. They are also keen on mooching about in garden compost heaps.



Slow worms are found throughout the British Isles (see distribution map on left). They are not native to Ireland, although a small colony has been introduced there in the west.

Slow worms tend to emerge from their hiding places to hunt at dusk or after rainfall. They are not particularly speedy reptiles and feed on slow-moving prey such as slugs, snails, spiders, insects and earthworms.

Male slow worms vary in colour from grey to light brown or bronze with a pale belly. Females are typically browner than males, and have darker brown flanks, a dark belly and a black stripe running along the back. Both sexes, but more commonly males, sometimes have blue spots on the body.

Slow worms hibernate from October to February/March under piles of leaves, within tree roots and in crevices of banks. They hibernate both communally and on their own. Sometimes they share hibernating sites with other reptiles.



Courtship tends to take place between mid-May and late June. At this time males become aggressive towards each other. Courtship may last for as long as 10 hours before copulation occurs. During copulation the male takes hold of the female tightly in his jaws, grasping her at the head or neck. Usually between 6 and 12 young are born from mid-August to mid-September, after a gestation period of 3-5 months. The young slow worms are initially encased in an egg membrane, which they immediately break free of, and measure 70-100 mm in length. It takes 6 to 8 years for them to be fully grown, although they become sexually mature by 3 or 4 years in males and 4 or 5 years in females. They are long-lived animals - one specimen is known to have lived for 54 years.