

The wonderful alien slug!



Can you imagine an animal with both eyes and noses poking out on tentacles from its head, and yet another two tentacles for touch and taste, that breathes through a hole in its back (pneumostome) with one lung, and also has a foot attached to its stomach? It has a mouth below its sensory tentacles with a tongue called a radula – which is covered with about 27,000 tiny tooth-like denticles. It sounds like an alien, doesn't it?

If that wasn't strange enough they have only one foot which moves along on a trail of slime (mucus) produced by a gland under the foot. Slugs move by contracting muscles on the underside of the foot – this causes a wave that moves down their bodies. They secrete a layer of mucus to lubricate slugs' path along the ground. This mucus is also used as the slugs' navigation system. They can find their way back to their tunnels and feeding sites by following their own slime trail. We use some slugs' slime in making cosmetics and in medicine.

There are probably lots of them living in your back garden. On average there are 20,000 slugs in each garden! In the UK there are about 30 different species of slug and four of these are called 'pest species' because they cause up to £8 million worth of damage to crops in the UK every year. If a slug is frightened or not active the slug will retract its head into the mantle (the thicker flesh behind its head) for protection. In some slug species there is a small piece of shell in the mantle, this is because slugs have evolved from snails.

Most slugs live underground in tunnels so the ones that can be seen feeding above ground are only approximately 5% of the total slug population. Slugs prefer cool weather, rain and fog because without a shell (as snails) they may dry out in dry and warm weather. Slugs grind up their food and eat a variety of things, such as: young leaves, seedlings, fungus, fruits, and decaying materials. Most species of slugs are herbivorous. Some though are carnivores.

Slugs belong to a group of animals called molluscs. Most molluscs live in water, like squid, mussels and clams. The molluscs are invertebrates.