

LEVELED BOOK • N

The Secret Lives of Snails and Slugs



Written by Terry Miller Shannon

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A land slug (left) and a land snail (right)

Introduction



Can you guess what walks on one slimy foot? Here's another clue: this animal has a tongue covered with sharp teeth. Believe it or not, the right answer is a snail or slug. You'll be amazed when you discover more about these creepy crawlers!

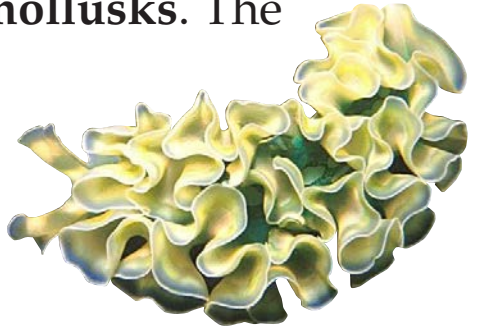


Sea snails on a sea fan

Snail and Slug Bodies



Snails and slugs are much alike. They belong to the family of animals called **mollusks**. The mollusk family also includes clams, squids, and octopuses.

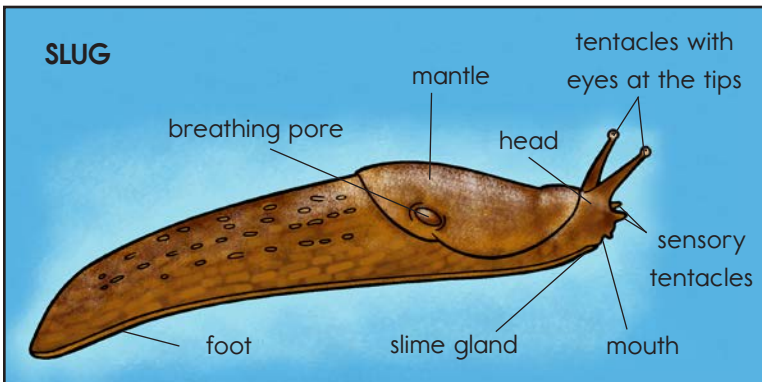
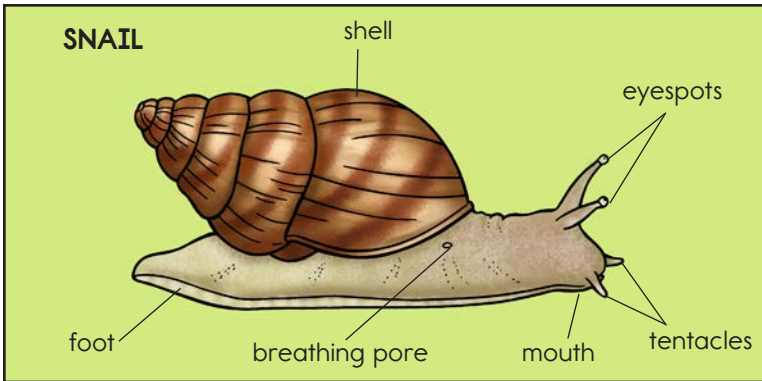


Ruffle-back snail

All mollusks have soft bodies and no backbones, and most have shells to protect their bodies. Even slugs have a tiny shell hidden beneath their skin.



Snail with spiral-shaped shell



Snails and slugs are also called **gastropods**, which means “belly foot.” A snail or slug has one foot, with its head at one end. It seems to walk on its belly, but actually it is crawling on its foot. Snails and slugs have tongues with many rows of tiny sharp teeth.

Snails and slugs have four **tentacles** shaped like arms. At the ends of the top two tentacles are the eyes. These top tentacles are also used to smell. Slugs and snails use their bottom two tentacles for feeling their way along.



This snail's foot is the large pad in the center.



Snail leaving a slime trail

Slime



Snails and slugs move very slowly, gliding along on their single feet. The foot produces slime that helps the snail crawl, like sliding on a bed of jelly. The goo is sticky, so it also helps the animal climb. Slugs and snails drink through their skin, and their slime filters the water.

Slime also helps protect snails and slugs. Birds, snakes, crabs, turtles, and other animals eat snails and slugs. But the slime makes it difficult for these hunters because dinner gets very sticky. Slug slime also tastes awful. This disgusting goo helps stop animals from eating snails and slugs.



Seagulls especially like snails.



A snail in a wet, mossy area

Kinds of Snails and Slugs



The first snails and slugs probably lived around 600 million years ago. Today, there are around 80,000 kinds of snails and slugs. Some snails and slugs live on land, and others live in water. Many beautiful slugs and snails live in the ocean. Both land and water snails and slugs love wetness. If a snail or slug dries out, it will die.

Snails and slugs can be as tiny as the period on this page, and the largest are the size of rabbits! Snails can



Sea slug

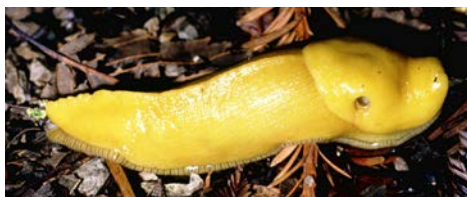
have dull, bright, spotted, or



Snail on a tree

striped shells. Many sea slugs are brightly colored with red, blue, purple, silver, or yellow. Most land slugs are brown or green.

One slug looks quite a bit like a fruit. It is the banana slug, which lives in the western United States. A banana slug is yellow with black spots, and it can grow as big as a banana.



Banana slug searching for food



A snail searches for food with its tentacles.

The Lives of Snails and Slugs

Like bears, land snails and slugs sleep through cold winters. Snails nap in their shells, and slugs sleep in holes they've dug in the dirt. In the spring, they come out. They're very hungry after they wake up, and they need to find plants to eat.

Snails and slugs spend most of their time searching for food. Land snails and slugs eat live plants, and some eat dead plants, too. They rub their tongues on leaves and stems. Sharp teeth on their tongues grind off bits of plants. Sea snails and slugs eat underwater plants, sponges, and tiny ocean animals.



Snails can cause damage to leaves (right).





A snail laying eggs

Almost all snails and slugs lay eggs. When each egg hatches, a baby snail or slug crawls out. How long does a snail or slug live? It depends on the type and size. Small snails and slugs usually live about six months, and large snails and slugs might live eight to ten years.



Slugs help turn dead plants into soil.

Conclusion



Some snails and slugs can damage crops and gardens, but snails and slugs are very important. They clean up the world by eating dead plants. They provide a source of food for birds and other animals. Now you know all about the secret lives of snails and slugs!

Do You Know?

Many people love to eat snails cooked in butter and garlic. In some areas, snails are served in soup or salads.



Glossary



gastropods	a group of mollusks that move on one foot (p. 6)
mollusks	a large group of animals with soft bodies and no backbones; includes oysters, clams, mussels, snails, slugs, squids, and octopuses (p. 5)
tentacles	long, slim stems on some animals used to feel, grab food, move, or cling (p. 7)

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