

1. Slow Worms and Other Reptiles and Amphibians



This sheet tells you about our flagship species the slow worm with guidelines on how to help reptiles and amphibians generally.

FLAGSHIP SPECIES

The slow worm is a harmless species of reptile found throughout the UK. Slow worms can do well in both rural and urban places and burial grounds can be really good for them. With a little extra care a site can become suitable for slow worms and at the same time help other reptiles such as grass snakes and amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts.

The slow worm is a flagship species of Caring for God's Acre.

We are working with Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and Amphibian and Reptile Groups UK to encourage slow worms in burial grounds and to find out which sites they are using.

amphibian and reptile conservation



ARG UK

KNOW YOUR SLOW WORMS

The slow worm is often mistaken for a snake but is actually a lizard without legs. It has eyelids, a flat forked tongue

and can drop its tail to escape from a predator. All of these are features of lizards not snakes. Slow worms grow from 4cm at hatching to about 30cm long and can live a long time; the record is held by a male slow worm which lived for 54 years in Copenhagen Zoo!

Like all reptiles slow worms use the heat of the sun to warm themselves. However they rarely bask out in the open, but usually stay under cover, often in long grass, woodpiles and compost heaps where they hunt for slow moving prey such as slugs and worms. They hibernate over winter amongst tussocky grass, log piles, compost heaps or stones, emerging in spring and breeding in May. Slow worms are described as 'giving birth'



Slow Worm

to young rather than laying eggs. Technically however the female slow worm actually holds the eggs in a membrane within her body until the young are born in August or September. This type of 'live birth' is called 'ovoviviparity'.

Staying within the law

All reptiles are protected by law and it is illegal to deliberately kill, injure or sell them.

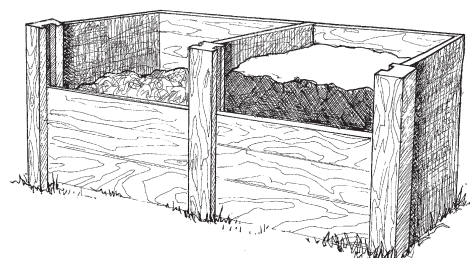
How to help slow worms, other reptiles and amphibians

- Have a variety of habitats such as different lengths of grass, nettles, brambles, hedges and stone walls. Leave some tussocky grass or scrub, next to a wall or hedge.
- Keep some areas free of tall trees and dense scrub. Although slow worms like to stay under cover in grassy areas, it is important that these areas are open to the sun so that the ground warms up sufficiently for the slow worms to be active. Trees and scrub give too much shade; slow worms favour long and tussocky grassland.



Yorkshire Fog

- Slow worms need to keep their body temperature in the high 20°C to digest food and for the young to develop in the female.
- Have a compost heap, preferably in a sunny situation. It will become a basking site, a place for grass snakes to lay eggs and slow worms to hunt for food. Watch out for grass snake eggs in compost heaps; these are white, leathery and about 3cm long. Young hatch in August or September so do not empty the compost heap until October.



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Common British Amphibians and Reptiles

AMPHIBIANS

Animal

Smooth newt Male well marked with spotted flanks in breeding season.

Palmarie newt can be confused with smooth newt outside breeding season. Best way to distinguish is using spotted throat of smooth newt.

Great crested newt Largest newt. Male has a striking crest during breeding season.

Common frog Smooth skin, greenish brown to olive in colour with darker blotches.

Common toad Warty skin more brown than frog's.

Habitat

Found in and around ponds, ditches and lakes during egg laying periods but also found in woods, meadows etc.

Good habitat features for all amphibians include:

- Gaps under flagstones for winter hibernation
- Deadwood for winter hibernation
- Attract insects and slugs as a source of food
- A pond for breeding in with lots of plants to provide shelter.
- Long grass to hide from predators

Food / predators

Insects, slugs, eggs and tadpoles of other amphibians.

Eaten by herons, otters occasionally, birds of prey and mammals when food is short



Follow a typical life cycle for an amphibian and see how you can improve your churchyard. Water is an essential part of an amphibian's life cycle, but it is a common misconception that they live in water all the time.



REPTILES

Animal

Adder Only venomous snake in Britain.

Zigzag pattern on back; creamy yellow to grey colouring; generally more reddish in females

Grass snake Olive body, darkish spots or streaks, distinct yellow and black collar behind head, 70-100cm in length

Common lizard 14cm long, brown/yellow brow. Green markings with striped back

Slow worm A legless lizard, 30cm long. Males grey, often having small blue spots on flank, females brown and black with black line on back

Habitat

Prefers woodland edge / heathland / bracken habitats

Often found near water, longer grass. Eggs often laid in compost heaps

Found in grassland, field and woodland edges, needs both dry, short grassland to sunbathe and areas of longer grass to escape into

Hedgerows with grassy borders, woodland margins. Compost heaps for hibernation. Warm sunny banks

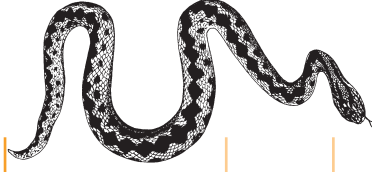
Food / predators

Feeds on small mammals

Eats tadpoles, frogs and fish

Insects

Eats slugs, caterpillars and insects



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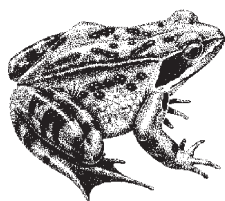
- Make a deadwood pile in long or tussocky grass. Slow worms, frogs, toads and newts hibernate and hunt here. As the wood rots away the amount of food increases. A pile of stones can provide hibernating and resting places.
- When cutting, check the area is clear before using mowers and strimmers in long or tussocky grass.
- Monuments can shelter reptiles and amphibians. Walls and chest tombs make good shelter. Tussocky grass around monuments and against walls, ideally linked to other areas of long grass, is ideal.

Finding slow worms

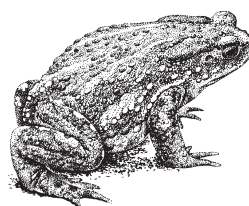
Although found across Britain slow worms are rarely seen. To find out if you have slow worms look under 'cover objects' such as pieces of carpet or corrugated iron (see sheet B10, Surveying for Plants and Animals) as well as keeping an eye out prior to cutting grass.

Tell us about your burial site wildlife

Let [Caring for God's Acre](#) or [Amphibian and Reptile Conservation](#) know about slow worms and other interesting reptiles and amphibians seen.



Frog



Toad

Useful contacts

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, www.arc-trust.org

Amphibian and Reptile Groups UK – a network of local groups, www.arguk.org

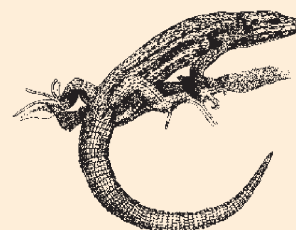
Caring for God's Acre – tell us what you have found in your site, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Froglife, www.froglife.org

Useful reading

Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Ireland – Field Studies Council fold-out chart

Reptiles and Amphibians of the UK, www.herpetofauna.co.uk



Common Lizard