

SLUGS

Slugs can simply be defined as a snail without a shell. They belong to the Mollusk phylum as do clams, nudibranchs, and snails. Two species of slugs are commonly found in the rainforest, both come in a variety of colors. The native slug to the area is the Banana Slug (Ariolimax columbianus) and can grow to 12 inches (26 cm) in length, which makes it the largest land mollusk. It is a relatively innocuous creature often marked with black splotches on a slate-green or yellowish skin. Slightly smaller (7-15 cm) is the introduced European Black Slug (Arion ater). The color of this slug ranges from a coal black to a reddish brown. A distinctive feature is the numerous grooves and ridges running along the back of this relatively aggressive slug.

LOCOMOTION: Muscles run along the foot of the slug from the mouth to the tail. Slugs contract the rear of their foot first moving it forward, compress it, then transfer this small compressed area forward in a wave, emptying out in front. Ten to 18 waves of constriction can be sent forward at one time. Slime is dribbled from the chin which is slick as grease yet sticky as glue. The result is that they glide effortlessly on a trail of slime at speeds of about 0.007 mph or 3-4 inches per minute.

SENSES: The olfactory organs used for detecting smells are located on both the short and long tentacles in the head region. Food is located by scent. Eyes that can only see light and dark patterns are located on the tips of the long tentacles. Food is also located by sight.

FOOD: Mostly plants, fungus, and decaying vegetable matter. An important role of the slug is that it recycles nutrients back into the soil. The slug cannot chew but rasps food off with its tongue, called a radula, that is covered with thousands of tiny teeth.

BREATHING: Half of the required oxygen is provided through a large hole in the side of their head region called a pneumostome. The rest of the oxygen is absorbed through the moist skin. The pneumostome is also used for the excretion of wastes.

LIFESPAN: One to 5 years.

PREDATORS: Shrews, beetles, crows, and garter snakes.

DEFENSE: The slime of the slug, while aiding in locomotion and acquiring oxygen may also be toxic or unpleasant to predators. Some species of slug may sacrifice their tail or twitch violently to confuse predators.

REPRODUCTION: Slugs have elaborate courting and mating rituals. Sexually slugs are hermaphrodites (both male and female organs present on each individual) and can fertilize their own eggs if no other mate is around. Fifty to 150 eggs are laid each year.

References: Gauger, Rick. 1983. "The Lives of a Slug." Pacific Northwest Magazine. May.
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