

# Woodland Creatures factfile



This factfile intends to provide the background information necessary for teachers to use the lesson plans and worksheets confidently. A number of other websites that may be useful include Wikipedia, ARKive, BBC Nature, Naturenet, RSPB and The Wildlife Trust.

## Centipedes

The Centipedes and the Millipedes are nearly all long and slender animals with many body segments and numerous legs. They were once lumped together into a single group known as the Myriapoda. This name means 'many feet' and it was a very apt one for these animals. It is still quite a useful term although it is now realised that the centipedes and millipedes are not closely related and they are now put into their own separate classes.

Centipedes are all relatively slender animals, several or many times longer than they are broad. The British species range from 5mm to about 70mm in length and their colours vary from pale yellow through to deep brown. Centipedes are covered with a tough outer coat, they lack a waterproof layer and they are confined to moist areas where there is no danger of drying up. Many live in the soil and leaf litter, while those that hunt freely on the ground are strictly nocturnal and spend the day hiding under logs and stones where they can keep moist. Like the Woodlice, they react strongly to touch and they do not normally come to rest unless both upper and lower surfaces are in contact with the surroundings. Such behaviour ensures that the animals end up under stones or bark, where they can be sure of moisture.

Centipedes do not have a 100 legs as the name suggests: there are between 30 and 202 in a fully equipped adult specimen; a pair to each of their body segments. Milipedes on the other hand, have two pairs of legs per body segment.

The centipede has a problem controlling so many legs when moving about, but the problem is eased in many species because each leg is slightly longer than the one in front. With this arrangement, the centipede is less likely to trip over its own feet. The last pair of legs is always slightly different from the rest and usually trails behind the body. These legs are well supplied with sensory bristles and they



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act as an extra pair of antennae. This is a very useful feature for animals whose hind quarters are some way from the head and which often need to back out of crevices.

The centipede is basically a predatory beast, although one of our garden species occasionally nibbles roots. They use their speed to run down and catch a variety of other creatures, including woodlice, harvestmen, spiders, mites, springtails, beetles, and many other insects. They also eat worms and slugs.

Their speed and poison claws give the centipede an effective defence against most of their enemies, and little is known about the animals which may eat centipedes. Birds, including domestic chickens, eat centipedes when they can catch them, and so do shrews and toads. Ground beetles, spiders and harvestmen probably take appreciable numbers of centipedes when they are at their young stage in life, but the most important predator of a centipede is another centipede. Injured specimens are readily eaten in captivity, and their cannibalistic tendencies ensure that one rarely finds more than a single centipede under one stone.

## Slugs

Slugs and snails are molluscs. Both are classed as gastropods (literally 'belly-feet' in reference to the way they move); slugs are basically snails which lack, or have a very reduced shell. This lack of shell means that slugs are more susceptible to both predation and drought. Their mucus deals with the issue of drought to some extent. During very cold or dry weather they will burrow into the ground in an attempt to retain moisture. Some species of slugs hibernate underground during the winter in temperate climates, but in other species, the adults die in the autumn.

Slugs have two pairs of tentacles on their heads; the upper pair are sensitive to light (the 'eyes'), whilst the lower pair react to smell. Both pairs are retractable and can be regrown if lost.

Like other snails, a slug moves by rhythmic waves of muscular contraction on the underside of its foot. It simultaneously secretes a layer of mucus on which it travels, which helps prevent damage to the tissues of the foot. Its mucus may also act as a deterrent to predators due to its unpleasant taste.

Once a slug has located a mate (sometimes by following the 'slime trail'), they encircle each other and sperm is exchanged through their protruded genitalia. A few days later around 30 eggs are laid into a hole in the ground, or beneath the cover of objects such as fallen log.

Most are surface feeders, and tend to emerge at night or after rainfall. Like snails, slugs feed using their radula; a rough tongue-like organ which is covered in tiny teeth. Many slug species are an essential part of ecosystems by eating dead leaves, fungus and decaying vegetable material. Other species eat parts of living plants which has gained them rather a bad reputation with gardeners. Some slugs are predators, eating other slugs, snails and earthworms. Most slugs will also feed upon carrion; including other dead slugs. They are preyed upon by many different organisms; frogs, toads, snakes, hedgehogs, salamanders, some birds and beetles, and humans.

## Slowworm

Latin: *Anguis fragilis*

The Slow-worm is a lizard with no legs that is often mistaken for a snake. They grow to 40cm and are brown or grey. The scales are small and smooth giving slow-worms a metallic or polished appearance.

Females and juveniles have black or dark flanks and a thin black line running along the back. Adult males have a duller brown/grey background colour and usually lack the darker markings. Some males have a few blue spots that can be quite noticeable.

Slow-worms are fairly widespread throughout Britain and are found in a variety of habitats particularly grasslands and heathlands. Of all our native reptiles they are the most likely to be found in gardens and allotments. Although they may be noticed moving about on mild days, especially after rain, slow-worms spend most of their time underground or underneath objects lying around the garden.

Slow-worms spend most of their time in the roots of plants and the surrounding soil hunting for worms and other invertebrates that live in the soil. The small white slug that causes so much damage in vegetable gardens is another favourite food item. The skin, although comprised of scales is incredibly smooth and can vary in colour from a pale grey through to beautiful copper hues. Entirely black animals do occur although they are extremely rare. Male slow-worms tend to be a uniform colour all over whilst females tend to have darker sides and one or more stripes running the entire length of the upper body. Like the common lizard, the slow-worm can shed its tail if necessary and does not lay eggs. Baby slow worms appear a little later in the year than baby common lizards and are stunning little beasts. The upper body varies in colour from bright gold to silver or copper with a noticeable stripe running the length of the back. The sides and belly are black. Compost heaps are a favourite haunt of the slow-worm providing both heat and prey.

## Dor beetle

Latin: *Geotrupes stercorarius*

The Dor beetle (also known as Dung beetles) is one of our largest dung beetles. Dung beetles get their name from their rather unattractive habit of eating dung. Both the larvae and the adults eat their own weight of dung every day. While this may seem a strange choice of diet, there is little competition for it, and they do perform a vital cleanup role in the countryside. Animal dung is rich in nutrients, and dor beetles play a vital role in returning much of this material to the soil. They are found wherever there are large herbivores since these provide the dung on which they depend. They can also be found in parks, gardens and open woodland.

They are usually around 1.5-2cm long, oval in shape and black and shiny in colour. All have large, spiky front legs, specially adapted for digging. Their small heads have short antennae with fan-like tips.

Cow pats, horse droppings, fox scats: nothing goes to waste, although some have a strong preference for the dung of particular animals – Dor Beetles are very partial to cow pats.

Then if eating dung is not enough, supplies are stored for future use in shallow tunnels, and provisions set aside for newly hatched Dor Beetle youngsters in specially constructed, underground nest chambers running off a vertical tunnel that in some cases is 50 centimetres (24 inches) deep. Each egg is laid in a separate chamber with its own supply of dung.

These beetles were regarded as sacred by the ancient Egyptians.

The biggest threat to these beetles is the use of worming treatment for grazing animals. The chemical is used to treat worms in the animal's gut but remains in their dung after it has been deposited on the ground. The chemical then affects and kills the dor beetle larvae.

Although not a species of conservation concern, the dor beetle is an important food source for the greater horseshoe bat; a species that has been in decline for many years.

## Dormouse

Latin: *Muscardinus avellanarius*

The Common or Hazel Dormouse is the only species of dormouse native to the British Isles. The edible dormouse (Latin: *Glis glis*) has been accidentally introduced and now has an established population near Luton, in the east of England.

Hazel dormice are small rodents, with a body length of around 7cm with a tail around 6 or 7 cm. Dormice typically weigh around 18g, although this increases to 30-40g before hibernation from October to April. They have golden fur, black eyes and a furry tail. Nocturnal creatures, the dormouse leaves the branches of the undergrowth only reluctantly, meaning they are only rarely seen.

Dormice hibernate in nests beneath the leaf litter over winter. When they awake in the spring, they build woven nests of shredded honeysuckle bark, leaves and grasses in the undergrowth. If the weather is cold and wet, and food is scarce, they save energy by going into torpor (a kind of temporary hibernation). Dormice, therefore spend a lot of their time sleeping.



Dormice are mainly found in coppiced woodland with a wide variety of tree and shrub species, although they are sometimes found in hedgerows and coniferous plantations. Their diet adapts according to food availability. Flowers, fruits and insects (particularly aphids and caterpillars) form the basis of their diet. They are most likely to depend on the nectar and pollen of flowers in spring-summer, then insects as the flowering season passes, to be replaced by nuts and berries in the autumn.

Young are produced around mid-June. Litters tend to be small; 4-5 young are born blind and completely dependent on the adults. The young open their eyes after around 18 days, and they will remain with the female for around 6-8 weeks.

Dormice used to be relatively common and widespread, however today they are rarely encountered and seem to be concentrated in southern England. Scattered populations occur in Wales, NE England but they are absent from Scotland. Locally, they are only known to be on the border between Neath Port Talbot and Bridgend, with some isolated populations on the Gower, and in Rhondda Cynon Taff and Carmarthenshire. There are suitable dormice habitats

within the County Borough, but further survey effort is required in order to establish whether or not they are present.

Conservation of this species needs to focus on woodland management in order to create the range of conditions that this species requires. A diverse range of tree and shrub species is essential, as is a complex structure. Hedgerow links between woodlands assist with population movement, leading to the establishment of new populations and allowing breeding between populations.

## Bullfinch

Latin: *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

The Bullfinch is a small woodland bird. Males have a bright pinkish-red breast, a black cap and tail, and a bright white rump. Females are similar but with a duller breast.

Bullfinches are found in a variety of woodland edge and scrub habitats. It is often associated with tangled overgrown hedgerows and garden shrubbery. Nests are built in dense hedgerows from fine twigs, moss and lichens. 4-5 pale blue spotted eggs are laid in May. The female incubates the eggs for 12-14 days, then both parents feed the chicks. 12 to 16 days later the chicks fledge. A second brood is usually produced.

They feed on a variety of wild fruits and seeds, and the buds of various trees in spring. A single Bullfinch can remove up to 30 buds a minute. Bullfinches were once considered a 'pest' of fruit crops. Bullfinch numbers increased enormously in the 1950s and were a great problem for the fruit-growing industry. Many growers Bullfinches were trapped by fruitfarmers during this period.



Listed as of high conservation concern in Britain, the Bullfinch has suffered a recent dramatic decline in breeding numbers. Where suitable habitat exists in lowland Wales, the Bullfinch is found in relatively high numbers. However, many Welsh woodlands are virtually devoid of the tangled undergrowth that the Bullfinch prefers. Sheep grazing in woodland is to blame for this, but agri-environment schemes such as Tir Gofal (which provide monetary benefits to farmers who implement wildlife-friendly practices and improvements on their land) have improved the situation somewhat. As a result of recent declines the Bullfinch is on the Red List. It is also has a UK Biodiversity Action Plan and is included in Neath Port Talbot's Local Biodiversity Action Plan.