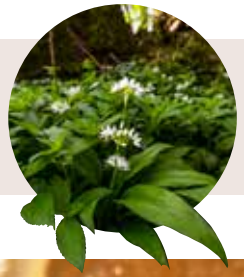
wild about APRIL



Wild garlic (ramson) season begins in shady woodlands

Swallows arrive from Africa

TINY & WILD ROSS PIPER

In defence of slugs

Let's face it, slugs don't have many admirers. But here's why they should.

FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about slugs (and which species are pests) at **slugwatch.co.uk**

Gardeners and farmers are unlikely to sing their praises, thanks to slugs' plant-munching habits, and most other people are repulsed by their sliminess. However, like every other living thing on our planet, slugs are important components of their ecosystems. In the UK we have around 44 species of slug, ranging in size from easily overlooked 1cm tiddlers such as the marsh slug (*Deroceras laeve*), all the way up to whoppers such as the ash-black slug (*Limax cinereoniger*), which can reach 30cm.

Only about seven of these species are pests.

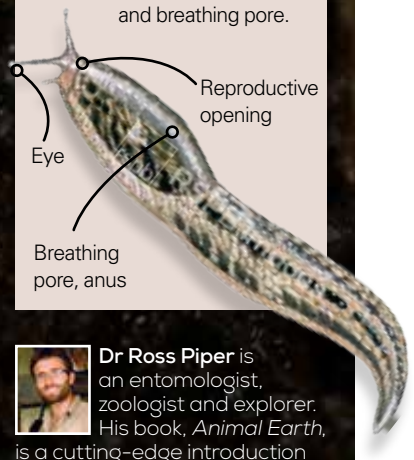
On the whole slugs eat all sorts of things, but every species has particular preferences. As well as living plants they will eat rotting plant and animal matter, fungi, animal faeces, earthworms and other slugs. On my patio, I regularly find green cellar slugs (*Limacus maculatus*) tucking into chicken poo under cover of darkness. Not only are they part of nature's clean-up crew, recycling huge amounts of organic material back into the soil, but they are also very important as food for a whole host of other animals, ranging from carabid beetles to birds. Some of the larger carabid beetles (e.g. *Carabus spp.*) may even be specialist mollusc munchers.

Slugs are terrestrial snails that have lost their shells – some types of slug even retain a vestige of the shell, but it is often internal. A shell is handy protection against drying out and predators, so why did slugs lose theirs? Snails need lots of calcium to make their shells and must live in places where this calcium can be found in the soil. Losing the shell means that slugs can live in places where there's not much calcium, and it also allowed them to become burrowers.

The slugs we see on the surface are only a small proportion of the local population. Their muscular, flexible bodies make them superb burrowers and they spend most of their time in the upper 10cm of the soil, mostly to avoid drying out. The skin of a slug is leakier than a tea bag, so hot and dry conditions are their nemeses. In such conditions they can burrow much deeper into the soil – perhaps a metre or more.

SLUG BIOLOGY

Early in the evolution of snails, their body became twisted so that most of the organs are immediately behind and above the head. This has some interesting consequences, which you can clearly see in slugs. The pore for the reproductive organs is directly behind the head and a bit further back is the anus and breathing pore.



Dr Ross Piper is an entomologist, zoologist and explorer. His book, *Animal Earth*, is a cutting-edge introduction to animal diversity. Find out more at **rosspiper.net**

WHAT'S ON APRIL

High Tide Guided Walk
9 April

Enjoy a leisurely walk around the two lagoons and saltmarsh to see what wildlife is about at RSPB Crook of Baldoon, Dumfries & Galloway. **rspb.org.uk/crookofbaldoon**

Easter Hunt
12 April

Come and look for the egg-stra special clues in Ynis-hir's woodland. Can you solve the puzzle? £3 per child, email **ynys-hir@rspb.org.uk**

Birdwatching by Bike
12 April

Join a gentle off-road guided ride, with plenty of stops, being active and discovering the wildlife of Medmerry. Look out for avocets, cuckoos, yellowhammers and corn buntings. BYO bike, £4 members (£7 non-members) book via **xxxxxx xxxxxx**

Birdwatching for Beginners
12 April

Discover Pagham Harbour's spring birds, using size, shape and colour markers to learn your chiffchaff from your willow warbler, **rspb.org.uk/paghamharbour**