

## SLUGS AND SNAILS

In October the speaker at the monthly meeting of the Ongar Wildlife Society (OWLS) was Howard Drury. His talk was entitled *Slugs and Snails*, a topic of interest to naturalists, gardeners and farmers alike.

He began by recalling the antiquity of molluscs, the group to which all slugs and snails belong. Anticipating the question of how do slugs and snails differ from one another, he listed their features and emphasised that all of them have shells but, whereas they are large and obvious in snails, they are tiny and under the surface in most slugs. The exception is the shelled slug, fairly common in this country, which although typically slug-like, has a small but clearly visible external shell near the rear of the body.

We were shown pictures of their rasping tongue and of the damage that they inflict on plants, crops and fruit. Howard also showed photographs of a range of plants that are less attractive to these molluscs and so are worth considering when adding new plants to the garden. Once again he returned to the shelled slug which is pale brown in colour and measures up to 5 inches in length. It lives mostly underground, but may sometimes be found beneath stones or in leaf litter. This slug hunts and eats earthworms, departing from the vegetarian habits of its relatives.

Slugs and snails move by means of a muscular foot that secretes mucus allowing the animal to glide across the surface. Having travelled, the mucus dries to form the familiar, tell-tale, silvery slime trails. Under certain conditions they secrete slime which dries and hardens over the opening of the shell, preventing them from drying out and enabling them to survive extreme heat or cold. It is now known that the snails' slime contains unusual crystals of a chemical called calcite which makes it strong and sticky, and has potential in medicine for the treatment of broken bones and in operations such as hip replacements.

Unlike most other animals, snails and slugs are hermaphrodite, that is they possess both male and female reproductive organs. However at any one time they function as either male or female. When mating, they fire "love darts" which may have been the origin of the story of Cupid, also known as Eros, firing an arrow from his bow. Snails lay their eggs into holes in the soil, and normally they hatch in about three weeks, but may remain dormant for several years. It takes about two years for snails to mature and they may live for five to ten years.

Countless methods have been devised to control these little animals, the most widely used being slug pellets. We were told that in this country alone, 400 billion slug pellets are used every year. Everyone has their favourite control method and they include encouraging frogs, toads, hedgehogs and thrushes; traps baited with orange, grapefruit, melon and beer; barriers of copper tape, crushed rocks and broken egg shells; hand removal at night by torchlight and sprinkling them with salt.

**Keith Snow**