

SliC - Slow-worms in Churchyards Project

DARN is a volunteer group that is affiliated to ARG UK - the national Amphibian and Reptile Group.

DARN offers conservation opportunities for everyone. It aims to set up reptile transects all over Dorset to find out where the reptiles are so that they can be protected.

The SliC Project is co-ordinated by DARN and aims to find and study the Slow-worm populations, primarily in Dorset's churchyards and in Hampshire in conjunction with HIWARG (Hampshire and Isle of Wight Amphibian and Reptile Group).

5-10 carpet tiles or roofing tiles are laid out in tall vegetation or near a hedge, tree or shrub and this route or transect is walked once a month to check if there are any reptiles underneath the tiles and whether any other reptiles are seen out foraging or basking in the sun. The tiles provide protection from predators and a place for the reptiles to warm up either under the tiles or on top. Reptiles are cold-blooded and they need warmth to become active. It is important not to disturb the tiles too often otherwise the reptiles may not use them again.

If you would like to join in with the SliC Project then email:

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Further information about amphibians and reptiles can be found on

The DARN website: www.groups.arguk.org/DARN

or the HIWARG website: www.groups.arguk.org/HIWARG

Thanks to Pete Gillatt for the Slow-worm photos

The churchyard is St Mary's, Motcombe, photographed by Sheila Dyason



Slow-worms in Churchyards

By Sheila Dyason

Chair of DARN

(Dorset Amphibian and Reptile Network)

Secretary of HIWARG

(Hampshire & Isle Of Wight
Amphibian and Reptile Group)

Wildlife habitats in churchyards provide a thriving ecosystem for many different species, including reptiles. Slow-worms are the most common reptile found.

The Slow-worm *Anguis fragilis*, looks like a small snake but it is actually a legless lizard. Lizards have an eyelid, which snakes do not have, and can, therefore, blink, which snakes cannot. Like other lizards it can shed its tail as a defence mechanism to avoid predation. The tail will grow back but it is never as long as the original tail. Therefore, if it is necessary to pick up a Slow-worm, to move it out of danger, hold it nearer to the head end or gently scoop it up with both hands. They do have teeth but they do not bite people and are completely harmless.

Slow-worms are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and it is illegal to deliberately kill, injure or buy or sell Slow-worms.



A male Slow-worm with few markings and no dark flanks or line down the back

Slow-worms have very small scales and this gives them a shiny metallic appearance. New-born juvenile Slow-worms are gold or bronze in colour with a dark stripe down their back and dark flanks. The markings are similar to a female but the juveniles could be males. Males do not develop their true colouration until their second year. Adult males do not have dark flanks and are more evenly coloured beige, brown or grey. They sometimes have blue flecking.

Like other reptiles, Slow-worms are independent as soon as they are born. Slow-worms can grow to 40 cm and can live to be 20 years old in the wild. In captivity they can live longer and one Slow-worm at Copenhagen Zoo reached the grand old age of 54!

They eat slugs, snails, spiders, insects and earthworms. They hibernate in the winter in leaf litter or among tree roots.



A female Slow-worm with dark flanks and a line down her back