

Snails

What do you think of when it comes to snails? While they may seem like tiny creatures with little purpose, they play just as an important of a role in the ecosystem as any other creature of Mother Nature. In fact, snails are one of the oldest animal inhabitants of the world. Snail fossils have been discovered by scientists and can be dated back millions of years (interestingfunfacts.com). They provide food for birds, other animals and people.

Anatomy

Snails are classified as a mollusk, meaning they have a shell. Can you think of other creatures that have shells? They are a triploblastic protostome organism. That means they have three germ layers or parts which include a foot, head, and body. It takes the establishment of a visible embryo before the parts are distinguished differently or identifiable (wikipedia.com).

Snails are invertebrates so their shell is their protection for the rest of the body. They vary in size ranging anywhere from a few centimeters to several inches. The largest snail on earth is the African Giant Snail (planetoddity.com). They can grow up to eight inches.



Image granted by Sonel

Since snails cannot hear, the tentacles are one of the most important organs. Their digestive system adapts based on what the *species* of snail eats. Marine snails breathe with a gill while terrestrial snails have a small lung. Snails are also classified hermaphrodites, meaning they can both lay eggs and fertilize them (snail-world.cpm)! To protect themselves from predators, snails leave behind slime. This slime is also what helps them move along a variety of terrestrial surfaces.

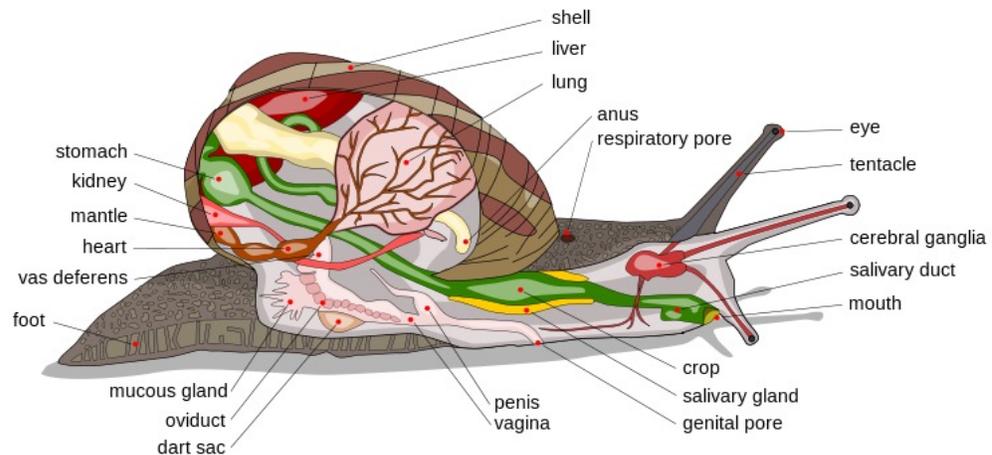


Image granted by Jeff Dahl

Food

Snails eat based on what is in their environment. They are typically herbivores and eat things such as plants, fruits, and vegetables. For their calcium, they like to eat dirt! They are mostly nocturnal, seeking their food at night.

Other Facts

Slowness is often associated with snails. They are one of the slowest moving creatures on earth. Their speed only reaches about fifty yards per hour. While they might be slow, they can lift up to ten times their own body weight when in a vertical position (snail-world.com).

Some snails hibernate. Some snails hibernate not just because it's cold, but to survive other extreme weather conditions such as droughts.

The lifespan of a snail can be up to twenty years!

Snail Pest Management

Many snails, especially to farmers, serious gardeners and nurseries are considered a pest. Too many snails can ruin an entire crop or garden. However, rather than using pesticides, there are more humane ways to manage these nuisances.

Trapping, hand picking, relocation, barriers, and even a different irrigation system will reduce the amount of snails that will invade plants. California is one state that has developed a snail and slug management guideline through a statewide integrated pest management program. It is always more desirable to use natural methods rather than chemical management because of the hazards associated with toxins. Visit their site at www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PGM/PESTNOTES/pn7427.html

Snails in Culture

Snails have been used in a variety of cultural dishes for centuries. Ever heard of escargot? The French prepare a fancy cuisine by cooking snails with garlic and butter. The French consume nearly forty thousand metric tons of it every year. Escargot is such a popular dish that it has its own day to celebrate it. May 24th is called National Escargot Day (punchbowl.com).



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In cultural history, snails are revered rather than eaten. In Ancient Greece, snails that were found in crops such as corn stocks, helped them recognize when the crops were ready to harvest. They represented fertility and fruition of hard work. The snail was also a symbol used frequently in ancient Mesoamerican cultures (kittythedreamer.com). The Aztecs associated snails with the moon and cycle of life. Ancient gods can be seen carrying them on their back in old artwork displays ([Aztec Thought & Culture](#)).