

This Species Action Plan sets out to maintain and enlarge slow-worm populations on Caravan Club-owned sites, and has been drafted for Club Site Teams and Site Wardens. It provides background information and makes recommendations on sympathetic habitat management for this species.

## Introduction

*Although it superficially resembles a snake, the slow-worm is actually a legless lizard. The generic name 'Anguis' comes from the Latin meaning, 'serpent' or 'snake'. 'Fragilis', meaning 'brittle', refers to the tail, which can be purposefully dropped, in order to escape predators. Slow-worms specialise in hunting slugs, snails and other slow-moving invertebrates – making them very useful animals to have in the garden.*

***The Caravan Club audit 2006 revealed that slow-worms are present at 23 Club sites, although this is likely to be an under-estimation***

## How to recognise this species

- Smooth and sinuous body, with grey, copper, or bronze colouration
- Eyelids present (i.e. not a snake)
- Females usually browner, with dark flanks & a black stripe down the back
- Older males (and sometimes females) can have blue spots
- Young are black with striking gold or silver longitudinal stripes down flanks and back



Credit: Sergey Yeliseev

## Current status

- Once common and widespread throughout England, Scotland and Wales, slow-worm numbers are declining steadily, and there is serious concern over declines at both national and local levels
- The species is protected against killing, injury or sale under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) & has recently been added to the UK BAP Priority Species list
- Factors causing decline include:
  - Loss of favourable habitat through over-management (e.g. 'tidying up' sites, scrub removal), or unsympathetic management (e.g. insecticide and molluscicide use)
  - Direct killing, through careless mowing or strimming;
  - Heavy shading, where previously favourable habitats become overgrown with trees;
  - Increase in uniform, very short grass swards, which provide very poor reptile habitat, creating predation risk, and reducing prey availability;
  - Lack of linear features connecting suitable habitats;
  - Development of brown-field sites, and allotments
  - Intensive agriculture, which often deploys an array of chemicals with direct or indirect consequences for predators such as the slow-worm.

## Ecology/management requirements

**Habitat:** Woodland and hedgerow edges, gardens, allotments, long grasslands, scrub, and brown-field sites, particularly in mosaics of these habitats. Prefers moist conditions with varied plant structure (different heights, open and dense areas, etc). The sinuous body is designed for difficult terrain, where slow-worms find invertebrate prey, and cover from predators such as cats and birds. Unlike other UK reptiles, slow-worms rarely bask in the open, preferring to warm themselves under vegetation, logs, planks, scrap metal, or rocks which are exposed to the sun.

**Food:** Slow-moving invertebrates, particularly slugs, snails, spiders, insects, and earthworms.

**Reproduction:** Gives birth to 5-26 live young in August - September, often in compost heaps.

**Hibernation:** Slow-worms hibernate from mid-October to late February/March, usually under compost heaps or rubble, but also under leaf litter, roots, and in the crevices of walls and banks.

## How to look after this species

	Site safeguard and management	Species management and protection
DO'S	<p><b>DO</b> <u>Lay new hedgerows</u>, if there is space. Look for opportunities to replace fencing with hedgerow</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Maintain/increase areas of suitable habitats</u>, where possible. Vegetational cover should be maintained throughout the year.</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Maintain/improve connectivity</u> between suitable habitats, to encourage healthy populations, and reduce predation in open terrain.</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Leave rocks and logs</u> in suitable areas across the site</p>	<p><b>DO</b> <u>Maintain/enlarge/create compost heaps</u>. This habitat provides excellent opportunities for basking, hunting, hibernation, giving birth to young, and hiding from predators</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Turn over compost heaps carefully using forks</u>, to reduce accidental deaths</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Provide logs and rocks, or even metal sheeting</u>, for shelter and basking</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Create reptile hibernacula for basking and hibernation</u>. These are easily made by partially covering a pile of loose rock/rubble/old wood/compost with sand or earth. These can be either buried or left as a mound above ground</p> <p><b>DO</b> <u>Set up a wildlife sightings board</u>, to stimulate visitor interest and to monitor the population</p>
DON'TS	<p><b>DON'T</b> <u>'over- tidy' available habitat</u>. Slow-worms need cover to hunt and to avoid their numerous predators</p> <p><b>DON'T</b> <u>Use insecticides or molluscicides on site</u>. These can poison slow-worms</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> <u>Keep cats on site</u></p> <p><b>DON'T</b> <u>Allow visitors to pick up slow-worms</u>, they can shed their tails as an escape response.</p> <p><b>DON'T</b> <u>Vigorously turn over composts with spades</u></p>

For further information on this species visit:

The Caravan Club Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for slow-worm: <http://www.caravanclub.co.uk>

Worcestershire BAP for slow-worm: <http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/home/wcc-bio-s9-slowworm.pdf>