

Bexley Wildlife

Bexley species spotlight – Lizards

Joe Johnson

Slow worm *Anguis fragilis* & common lizard *Zootoca vivipara*



Common lizard *zootoca viviparous*



Slow worm *anguis fragilis*

When most people picture lizards they think of almost prehistoric dragon-like, exotic but scary creatures that are found in deserts and rainforests, but this is not always the case. In Great Britain we have six native reptiles including three native lizard species, plus at least two non native species. Two of those native species: the common (viviparous) lizard and slow worm (a species of legless lizard) reside here in Bexley. Most Bexley residents are unaware of these cold blooded (poikilothermic) animals living around them and many would be taken aback by the sight of one. However, these creatures are not cold blooded killers. They are beautiful, increasingly rare, and very important animals (they help get rid of garden slugs for instance) and pose absolutely no threat to humans – only small invertebrates!

Slow worm *Anguis fragilis*:

The slow worm was the first native reptile I ever saw in the wild. Ever since that moment I was hooked on finding and observing these beautiful snake-like creatures. The slow worm is an often misunderstood animal with many people not really knowing quite what they are. Slow worms aren't worms or snakes, nor are they particularly slow moving either. Slow worms - or blindworms as they are sometimes called - are a species of legless lizard. You can tell a slow worm is a lizard, rather than a snake, by its eyes. If you look at a slow worm long enough they will blink, something which a snake physically cannot do. As well as their odd appearance, they are well known for their longevity and supposedly can live to over 30 years in the wild.

Appearance and size:

Slow worms really are beautiful lizards that vary highly in colouration from brick red to gold, grey and brown. Melanistic (black) slow worms are rarer and there are also male blue-spotted slow worms. These colour variations can be due to the sex of the animal with females generally being brown or red with a thin black dorsal stripe and black flanks and males being lighter coloured without stripes and having a longer head. Slow worms can also vary in size, but they tend not to get much larger than 50 cm. Juveniles are a golden bronze with jet black sides.



Diet and predation:

Slow worms are carnivorous and feed predominantly on small moving invertebrates, particularly small slugs. They will also feed on a range of small invertebrates such as worms, snails and grubs. Their mainly slug-based diet means they are very useful to gardeners and can be found on many allotment sites preventing slug damage to plants. Slow worms, like most reptiles, are no threat to humans. They dislike biting and are far more likely to slither off (at a surprising speed for a species deemed as slow) when confronted. However, if captured by a predator or a curious human they can drop their tail much like geckos and slither off unharmed. In fact many Bexley slow worms I have found do not have tails, most probably due to attack from domestic cats. Despite the fact that these creatures are harmless, please do not attempt to pick them up – because they will give you a little bite if they have to! A quick photograph is far better for all concerned. Despite their harmless nature, slow worms are prey for many native species such as foxes. However, it is the non-native species that pose the greatest threat to slow worm populations, particularly domestic cats and pheasants.

Brumation & breeding:

People often think lizards cannot survive here in the UK because of our rather chilly climate. However, they continue to thrive here due to their ability to brumate (hibernate) through the winter months. Slow worms hibernate together in a hibernaculum, usually deep underground (usually under stones and leaf litter). Slow worms can tolerate surprisingly low temperatures and can be seen here in Bexley as early in the year as late February, early March. Slow worms tend to mate a month or so after brumating and can have up to 26 tiny young in their litters, although usually a lot less than that. These neonates are precocial and do not get any help from their parents. They are left to fend and hunt for themselves from day one.

Thermo-regulation and shelter:

Thermoregulation, in layman's terms, is the control of body temperature, something vital to poikilothermic (cold blooded) animals such as the slow worm. They must alternately bask and hide in order to reach their correct body temperature. Slow worms are nocturnal hunters but must be active enough during the day to thermo-regulate in the sun. However, they spend much of their time either tucked well out of sight in leaf litter or under rocks, branches and under artificial cover (old carpet, felt or tin). Artificial cover like tin, plastic sheeting, felt etc. is perfect shelter for slow worms, and most other reptiles because it offers good protection from predators and retains heat very well which, again, helps with thermo-regulation.

Habitat:

Slow worms are very adaptable in terms of habitat. These animals favour brown field sites and heathlands, although they can be found in a huge range of habitats including lightly wooded areas, allotments and gardens. They are found particularly in gardens with compost areas as these contain good slug and snail populations, good places to hide from predators and perfect hibernaculum. Any areas with thick vegetation/cover to hide from predators, but with some open sun-lit areas, can house slow worms.

Bexley slow worms:

Slow worms can be found on a variety of different sites all over the borough and there are probably many more sites yet to be uncovered. Slow worms can turn up just about anywhere. A couple of years back I saw a juvenile slow worm in the middle of the road on Rochester Drive in Bexley. I gently moved it to some bushes close by. The River Cray acts as a perfect wildlife corridor and is extremely important for reptiles, with slow worms being found on many sites along its banks. This includes: Hall Place, Crayford Rough, Upper College Farm and Foots Cray Meadows. Slow worms can be found in Bexley's two largest woodland areas - Bostall/ Lesnes Abbey woods (and heath land) and Joydens/Chalk wood. A reptile and amphibian survey of Bexley's allotments by Chris Rose and Sam Ho has found them on 14 of 33 sites. As mentioned earlier, slow worms do thrive in gardens. Just ask 'Bexley wildlife's Chris Rose who has a slow worm population in his Barnehurst garden. This is not a one off and they are probably present in many gardens all over the borough. These garden populations are far more important than people think. They create vital wildlife corridors to prevent in-breeding and keep the population from declining.

What are you waiting for? Get yourself out and about and see if you can spot any of these beautiful creatures.

Common lizard *Zootoca vivipara*:



It took me a long time to find my very first common lizard. I decided to take the long walk home from work past the River Cray along Crayford Rough and Hall Place on a beautiful hot summer night a few years back. I picked up a piece of litter (a road sign) on the side of a sunny bank and there it was: a very speedy dark, juvenile common lizard. I've been obsessed with these little characters ever since. The common lizard has a far more typical lizard profile and appearance than its legless cousin the slow worm. The common lizard's lifestyle is also slightly different from the very adaptable slow worm, as I'll explain

below. Despite their name 'common lizards' and their widespread range they can be quite tricky animals to get a close up view of, or even spot in the first place.

Appearance and size:

Common lizards are generally seen as just a small brown lizard. However, anyone who regularly sees these animals will tell you otherwise. The male of this species can be very colourful and have a beautiful orange underside. Neonates of this species tend to be black or very dark brown which helps to keep them camouflaged from predators. Like slow worms they are said to be sexually dimorphic, although just like their legless cousins this isn't always 100% accurate. Females are generally striped in patternation whilst males are spotty. Wild common lizards can also be found in a variety of different morphs (colour mutations) including: plain/pattern less, melanistic (black) and green morphs. Common lizards are only small, getting to a maximum size of 8 inches, although most of that 8 inches is the animal's long tail.

Diet and predation:

Common lizards will eat pretty much anything small enough to fit into their tiny mouths. This means small invertebrates which they will chase down at great speed. Due to this diet they consume a huge range of different species. This can include: crickets, woodlice, pill bugs, worms, caterpillars, small moths, beetles, weevils, flies and spiders. Being so small, they are open to predation from many species. Like for slow worms, domestic cats are a huge problem for this species, as is the non-native pheasant. They have many other native predators including: corvids (crows, jays, rooks etc), foxes, herons, buzzards and red kites.

Brumation & breeding:

Like all native reptiles, the common lizard brumates through the winter months to escape the cold conditions of the British climate. Common lizards can tolerate very cool temperatures and emerge from brumation around February. However, this year, four juvenile common lizards were seen out basking by Chris Rose on 19 January! This species breeds not long after it emerges from brumation and generally give birth to its live young in the middle of summer, usually around July. This gives the young enough time to gain sufficient fat reserves to last through their first winter. The female generally gives birth to around 7 or 8 young, but large females can give birth to up to 11.

Thermo-regulation and shelter:

The cold blooded common lizard must thermo regulate its body temperature properly in order to become active enough to predate and prevent itself from being predated upon. Being diurnal (day active) this means they must spend a lot of time, particularly in the cooler months (spring/autumn), basking in the sunlight which helps to warm them and provide them with essential UV light. Artificial cover like tyres, refugia mats and tin is perfect as a basking site due to the fact the animal can retreat in cover if they are threatened. The darkness of these artificial covers keeps them warm, even in the night, and helps them stay warm even on cold nights.

Habitat:

Common lizards are 'brown field' specialists, thriving in rough grassland and heath land sites. However, they also seem to thrive in wetland areas (providing there are dry areas for basking, feeding and brumating). The reason they thrive in areas like this is because there is sufficient cover to protect them for predation and sunny clearer areas to act as basking points.

Bexley's common lizards:

Bexley is one of London's most important areas for common lizards. This is due to the fact that we have strong populations on a few sites here, unlike most London boroughs. Again, the River Cray is an extremely important wildlife corridor for common lizards. They can be found on many sites along the Cray, including: Crayford Rough, Braeburn Park (close to the Cray), Hall Place, Crayford Marshes and Thames Road Wetland. Bexley's common lizard population seems more fragmented than that of slow worms, partly because our generally rather manicured gardens and the levels of disturbance in them do not provide suitable habitat. They have, however, been found on 6 of 33 allotment sites where rough margins and banks between plots have allowed them to survive. Only two of these allotment sites share a border with a wider area of suitable habitat, with four being 'island' populations at long term risk of being lost. It is essential that common lizard sites in the wider landscape along the Cray are protected to prevent this beautiful species declining further.

I hope everyone has a new appreciation for our native lizards and maybe even learned a little about them, however one thing I must stress is new planned developments are threatening all of Bexley's lizards (along with a whole host of other wildlife) and people must object to these ridiculous plans before we lose these cold blooded beauties from our brown field and along our riversides forever.

All of the fantastic images used were supplied by Bexley's Jason Steel. Thank you. Joseph Johnson.