Quick ways to help Slow-Worms

Tim Weston outlines the many benefits to a shoot afforded by the humble slow-worm, and suggests ways to make them feel more at home

Gamekeepers not only provide suitable habitat for the species they are protecting, but they also help protect a whole host of other species that have nothing to do with game management. These include the “charismatic”, such as the barn owl or kingfisher, and the less charismatic (for instance the humble bumblebee). This is not because they get paid to do so but because they are people who love the countryside and everything in it.

The slow-worm is a species that needs our help in the countryside and many keepers are already doing a lot to improve populations in their local area. Some keepers are helping without even knowing it, by leaving sheets of tin on the ground when they take down their partridge pens, for instance, so that the worms can hide underneath.

Slow-worms are often mistaken for snakes; they have a very similar look, and move in the same way through the grass. However, the slow-worm is actually a legless lizard, with external ears, eyelids and a blunt tongue, not forked like a snake. In Britain the slow-worm is probably the most commonly seen reptile but it is still protected by law. It is illegal to kill, injure or trade in slow-worms.

Male and female slow-worms differ in appearance, with the male being greyish, brown, or coppery- or reddish-brown, typically without stripes. The male tends to have a broader, longer head than the female. The female is usually brown, copper-coloured or red on the back, with brown or black sides, often with lighter iridescent flecks. In many individuals there is a dark stripe passing along the middle of the back and stripes running along the sides of the body. Adult slowworms are around 30-40cm long.

Spot them this month

The life cycle of the slow-worm is quite interesting because, unlike some reptiles, they give birth to live young in litters of between six and 12. These young reptiles are independent from day one and will head off immediately to look for food. Courtship occurs between mid-May and June and slow-worms can become quite aggressive during that time. During courtship the male will take hold of the female by biting her on the head or neck, and their bodies will become intertwined — this can last for up to 10 hours!

Slow-worms give birth in August and September so now is a good time to see them in the countryside. They will not be fully mature until they have reached about eight years of age, but the male is sexually mature at the age of about three and the female at about five. They are cold-blooded animals so they hibernate during the winter, usually from October to March, in soft earth, dung heaps or compost heaps. They can even be found hibernating in rubble.
Quick ways to help Slow-Worms

Slow-worms require a mixed habitat of rough grassland, areas to hide under, and earth or compost (dung) heaps to hibernate in. On most shoots, small or large, this should be relatively easy to achieve given a little forethought. As with some of the other species we have looked at in the shoot conservation series, it is a good idea to try to keep the rough grass areas at different heights thereby providing a multitude of habitats in a relatively small area. Slow-worms mainly eat slugs and snails so they are of benefit to keepers who grow game cover and to farmers, by helping to control agricultural pests that can devastate a crop.

It is also worth remembering that sometimes being too tidy removes habitat that can be utilised by animals such as the slow-worm. It is of genuine benefit to have slow-worms on the shoot to help control the slugs and snails — and it is also nice to be doing something a little different to help animals that might otherwise get overlooked by some of the large conservation charities. Unlike a great big, highly visible bird of prey, a slow-worm doesn’t help to generate massive amounts of public donations.

The slow-worm is not a swift reptile, but will try to avoid predators and can muster a surprising turn of speed when required. If it cannot avoid contact with a predator, it has two major defence mechanisms. Firstly, when caught, it will readily defecate, and although the faeces are not as foul smelling as those of the grass snake, they may be sufficiently unpleasant to deter some predators. Secondly, they will shed their tail, just as other lizards do, and this will lie on the ground, wriggling and distracting the attacker, allowing the slow-worm to make its escape. The tail, of course, will grow back.

Slow-worms are hunted by many species, such as corvids, buzzards, hedgehogs, badgers, foxes and the domestic cat. Research suggests that cats kill more slow-worms than any other predator. Good gamekeeping practice will help reduce the threat of predation from those species we are legally allowed to control through proven methods, helping the slow-worm and a host of other species.
Slow-worms are often mistaken for snakes, but they are probably Britain’s most commonly seen reptile.

What keepers can do to help
1. Make sure there are some rough grass areas beside fields and hedges.
2. Keep the grass at different heights by selective mowing.
3. Remove the strings from old bales and leave them in a heap on the field margins or cover crops out of the way where they won’t be moved. They will provide great hibernating habitat.
4. Leave some areas of loose soil in small heaps for hibernation.
5. Put some sheets of corrugated tin on the ground for daytime cover and sunning spots.
6. Don’t be too tidy — a small amount of rubble or fallen logs will help create habitats for the slow-worm.

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