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"Collecting Non-marine Mollusca"

by

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Land Molluscs.

There are few places where no molluscs are found at all, and little more is required beyond patience and a keen eye in order to find them. The collector soon becomes hardened to the silly questions of curious onlookers.

Most places will produce snails and slugs of some sort, but since they require moisture in order to survive, the damper places are usually those which yield living molluscs, and it is eminently desirable to collect them alive, though note should be made of dead shells of species not found living. Because of this need of moisture, damp weather is the more propitious for collecting, and the evening the best time of day, as the quarry is then on the move. Snails and slugs come out in great numbers after rain, but if rain is falling at all heavily remain under cover as the water dilutes their mucous secretions and makes it difficult for them to crawl. Some species, such as Helicigona lapicida, are virtually impossible to find during dry weather. Few snails will be found in winter, as most of them are hibernating, though slugs will appear during a mild spell and Vitrina are usually found alive only at this time of the year. In spring there will be many snails but few adults; the larger shells will more often have soft lips, indicating that growth has not been completed. In summer and autumn the number of adults will progressively increase. The British species of Helicella do not mature until the autumn, when they can be found abundantly in suitable habitats.

Any place with herbage is worthy of investigation. Trees should be examined, especially if they have rough or loose bark. Fallen logs, branches and even small twigs will produce snails, which also live under stones. All these should be carefully replaced after examination. Stone walls have their molluscan inhabitants, and so do brick ones if covered with ivy or creepers. Old brick walls, if built with mortar and not cement,

often support small species amongst the decayed mortar, which is rich in lime. Dead leaves in woods and hedges are often rich in snails, and many of the smaller species will only be found in any numbers by taking home bags of leaves, drying and sifting them. Here a lens will be a necessity. Flood rubbish will yield both land and aquatic species, and the gardener's rubbish heap should not be neglected, especially if dumped on waste land, since most snails and slugs feed on decaying vegetable matter. Other places where molluscs may be found are chalk downs, limestone moorlands, cliffs, quarries and chalk pits, while sand dunes by the sea have their own fauna. Marshes and fens unless acid have many snails. Darkness, a torch and a damp night are essentials for some species of slugs. Testacella may sometimes be found in the garden, seeking the worms on which they feed. With Milar a method, usually not meeting with approval, is to leave root crops in the ground too long.

The equipment required includes tins and glass tubes as containers. Two-ounce tobacco tins are particularly useful, but should be washed and dried after use or they will become rusty and mark the shells. A pair of weak forceps is required for the smaller snails, and a sheet of white paper or plastic is useful for shaking out grass roots when searching for subterranean species such as Ceciloides, which can also be found in ant hills. Plastic or material bags are needed for bringing home the leaves.

Freshwater Molluscs.

In searching for aquatic snails and bivalves no piece of water, however unsavoury it may look, should be neglected. Rivers, canals, streams, ditches, ponds and lakes all need attention: neither should temporary ponds or muddy patches which have held water be overlooked. In fast-flowing streams most of the snails will be found at the sides where the current is less, and rivers and streams with a good growth of water weed are usually more productive than those without. The mud or sand at the bottom will often yield bivalves both large and small. The reeds along the margins accommodate amphibious species and their swampy bases are worth searching.

As containers, stoppered jars, as well as tins and tubes, are useful. A fine-meshed scoop is needed. A five-inch kitchen strainer, the "horns" removed with a hacksaw, is most useful, and probably preferable to a net, for, while not catching any more, it is easier to examine, being of firmer texture. It can easily be fixed with wire to a suitable handle, and being cheap, can be readily replaced. The handle should be from three to four feet long, but for deeper water some extension is desirable. Chimney-sweep's rods come to mind, as they can be screwed together and dismantled as required. Wellingtons or waders add to the comfort of aquatic collecting.

General Remarks.

It has already been stated that most sorts of places yield molluscs,

but obviously some yield more than others. Generally, habitats on calcareous soil are more productive than those on acid soil. Woods on chalk or limestone are richer than those on gravel or clay; while pine woods are frequently quite barren, not because snails particularly dislike pine trees, but because they grow more usually on acid soil and there is seldom any ground flora in which the snails can find shelter and moisture. It is, therefore, a temptation to collect in the "good" places and neglect the "bad" ones. This is shown only too well in the Conchological Society's Census Records. The serious collector visits every sort of place, otherwise he cannot know correctly the kinds of places in which snails will live, and his collection will not give a true picture of molluscan distribution.

The most important pieces of equipment to be carried by any collector are notebook and pencils, for collecting without recording is a waste of time. If a snail cannot be identified on the spot, this can be done at home, but notes should always be made in the field. They should be as detailed as possible, containing descriptions of habitats with associated plants; where in the habitat the snails were found, e.g. on plants, on the ground, under leaves and so on. Notes on egg-laying, feeding and other activities should be added. The time of day, weather conditions and, of course, the date are important. It is as well to label containers with reference to the notes, and molluscs from different habitats should be kept apart. Finally, the locality must be given, and this should include the Grid Reference, so that a map is another essential.

When the material collected has been sorted, identified and recorded, it is suggested that a Census Record Card should be filled in and sent to the Recorder, Dr. M.P. Kerney, Department of Geology, Imperial College, Prince Consort Road, London, S.W.7., from whom cards can be obtained. When this has been done, the collector can feel that he has achieved something very much worth while, and has made a real contribution to our knowledge of the British Non-marine Mollusca.



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