

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

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Land Slug-Slow Train Coming

Torrential rains had bathed the landscape. The air smelt fresh and clean as I strode down the rain-splattered road near Mussoorie. Rain drops glittered on the leaves in the setting sun's rays, and every now and then, pine scented water droplets fell on my bare face, as I looked up. As I sashayed down the road enjoying the beautiful scenery around me, I almost stepped on what looked like dirty yellowish human excreta. I had to do a Michael Jackson gig to avoid stepping on what I believed to be muck. I turned around to glare at the inanimate object of disgust that had interrupted my splendid walk. Hey, hold on, the pile of excreta moved-moving shit, no less!

A closer examination revealed that the object of my attention was actually a yellowish coloured Land Slug. Land Slugs are lung breathing gastropods which belong to the phylum of molluscs. Gastropods (*gastr*=stomach, *pod*=foot) are named so, because they have large muscular, disc-like feet under their stomachs. Unlike snails, which are also gastropods, slugs lack, or have very rudimentary shells on their body.

I decided to stop and watch the slug. Having been disturbed by me, the slug remained motionless for a few minutes, before it gathered the courage to move. It raised its black antennae slowly, curling upwards and outwards, searching its surrounds for potential threats-namely me. While both its antennae are normally at full stretch, if it touches an unknown object, one antennae hurriedly withdraws, while the other continues to check out the scene! The upper antennae act as the slug's "eyes". On careful examination, you can see that the slug actually has another shorter pair of black antennae, directly below the upper pair, which provide it with a sense of smell.

Whether the flat surface of the road, the downslope of a culvert or a mossy vertical rock slope, the slug glides slowly, measured and assured in its movements, without slowing in pace. Its excruciatingly slow movements reminded me of Bob Dylan's classic-Slow Train Coming!



Intrigued by how slowly it moves, I decided to check its speed and timed its movements. At its quickest, the slug covered two and half inches in a minute, which translates to a supersonic speed of 0.00348 km per hour. Wow-who lugs this slug!

The slug moves by the contraction of its muscles on the underside of its body. When the slug moves, it leaves behind a trail of slime. This slimy substance acts as a glue and helps to secure the slug to virtually any surface that it moves on. On occasion, I have seen birds attempting to feed on slugs, but unable to separate the slug from the surface it is stuck to.

Even as I watched, the slug devoured a small brown decaying fungi. Its mouth is located just under its head. Sliding itself over the fungi, the slug slowly consumed the fungi, taking about a minute to polish off its food. Slugs normally feed on decaying vegetable matter, but are also known to feed on flesh, and hence are omnivores. By feeding on decaying matter, slugs perform a valuable service in keeping the web of life spinning.

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at doonwatch@gmail.com

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Making a difference: The festival season is here. Use eco-friendly clay idols that can dissolve naturally. Ensure these are painted with natural colours (better still, paint them yourself). Avoid using Plaster of Paris idols.

Photograph caption: The Land Slug-A Gastropod