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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Pam Freir

What native island critter has green blood, one foot which doubles as a stomach, more teeth than a shark (27,000). and can walk on broken glass without batting an eye?

Give up? Here's one more clue: it is capable of moving at a top speed of 32 feet per hour.

Scientists know this bizarre little critter *Ariolimax columbianus* — a banana slug to you and me. It's huge as slugs go—the second largest in the world. And it has a very eccentric body plan. Most of the parts required to sustain life are located on its head. The conspicuous opening you see there is the pneumostome, the slug version of a nose that leads to a single lung. Positioned disconcertingly close to the nose are the anus and reproductive organs— a definite design flaw from our perspective but a perfect arrangement for this compact little creature whose principal preoccupations are eating, breathing, plodding from more slugs.

On the underside of its head is the

mouth with those thousands of razor-sharp teeth. And at the tip are four telescopic tentacles: two small ones for taste and smell and, above them, two longer optic tentacles that allow the slug to distinguish dark from light.

At the nether end of the slug's body is a mucous-producing pore—protection against rear-end assaults by shrews, beetles and other predators. In between, the slug is all stomach which is just as well as it is in the habit of eating several times its own weight every day.

Another way the slug passes his time is making mucous. Slime. We give slug-slime a wide berth but it's hugely important to his survival and he produces it from glands all over his body. It greases the skids, so to speak, as he moves; it helps him retain the moisture he needs to stay alive; it helps in sniffing out potential mates and, after a day or two or even months on the road, its scent will guide him back home.

It doesn't do to probe too deeply into the mating ritual of the banana slug. Let's just say it works for him. Or him/her. Whatever. Slugs, being hermaphroditic, are pretty flexible about gender issues. But in the happy event that two slugs meet and fall in love it's a fairly major commitment. Everything takes rather a lot of time: hours and hours of circling, nipping, and rasping of flanks. And then, when all is said and done, another few hours to disengage one sticky slug from its equally sticky partner.

Inseparable, a predicament requiring do-it-yourself emergency surgery after which he becomes she and the

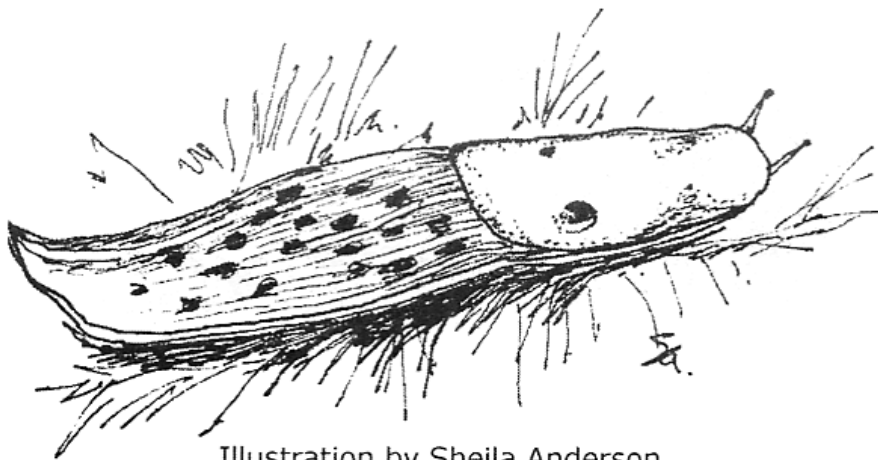


Illustration by Sheila Anderson

relationship takes on a whole new meaning.

Life's not a bed of roses for the poor little slug. But maybe, having gotten to know him a bit better, we'll at least think of him more kindly when he slinks his way into our lettuce patch...

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS welcome new members at any time. You don't have to be an expert on anything, although your know-how in any area will be enthusiastically received. We're a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling and sharing information about the natural world around us. If you'd like to find out more about whom we are and what we're up to, please contact Pam at 3322 or by email:

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