

Woodlice fact sheet

Woodlice may look like insects, but in fact they're crustaceans and are related to crabs and lobsters. It's thought there are about 3,500 species of woodlice in the world, and 35-40 of these can be found in the British Isles. Woodlice are sometimes called pill bugs and slaters. The pill woodlouse gets its name because it can roll itself up into a ball.



Woodlice like damp, dark places and can be found hiding in walls, under stones and in compost heaps. Some species such as the common sea slater are only found on the coast.

A woodlice has 14 legs and an outer shell called an exoskeleton. When a woodlouse grows too big for its exoskeleton it has to moult to allow a new shell to take its place. Moulting takes place in two stages, first the back half is shed and a day or so later the front half falls off.

They have a pair of antennae to help them find their way around, and two small 'tubes', called uropods, sticking out the back of their bodies. The uropods help them navigate and some species use them to produce chemicals to discourage predators. Most woodlice are found on land, but their ancestors used to live in water and woodlice still breathe using gills.

Woodlice eat rotting plants, fungi and their own faeces, but they don't pee! They get rid of their waste by producing strong-smelling chemical called ammonia, which passes out through their shells as a gas.

After mating, females carry their fertilised eggs in a small brood pouch under their bodies. The young hatch inside the pouch and stay there until they are big enough to survive on their own.

A common woodlouse can live for three-four years. Apart from man, its main predators are centipedes, toads, shrews and spiders.