



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



Slugfest

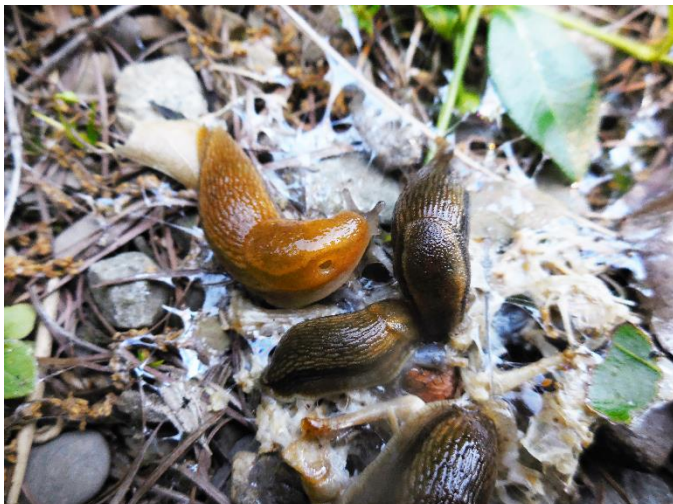
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Deep in thought about the Federal Reserve and how I embarrassed myself not knowing how to pronounce “taupe,” without really thinking about my weeds I tossed (gently, I assure you) the critter onto the lawn. I was repaid with a handful of the stickiest stuff. What in tarnation?

Truth: I was more interested in pulling as many weeds as I could (they pulled so easily after the rain), that I paid no attention to what had “glued” me. The mystery was quickly solved, however, for just off to my left and still on the walk, was a group of unattractive looking “things.” I don't know if I've ever had the pleasure of meeting before (well, they did give me this column) but I knew they had to be slugs. Folks, on your worst day, you can't be this sluggish.

Looking closely (well . . . why not?) I was surprised to see a pair of feelers coming from the front (I presumed) of its head. “It?” “Him?” “Her?” I wouldn't know. Do they? Were they sensors? There is so much to learn.

Let's begin with a simple what-is-it? Wikipedia tells me a slug is “any apparently shell-less terrestrial gastropod mollusk. Snails, on the other hand, are gastropods having a coiled shell large enough that they can fully retreat its soft part into the shell. Various taxonomic families of land slugs form part of several quite different evolutionary lineups. . . Thus, the varied families of slugs are not closely related. . . The shell-less condition has arisen many times independently during the evolutionary past.”



Those “feelers”? The two I could see are able to sense light and actually have “eyespots” on the tops. I missed the lower pair which provide a sense of smell.

Were you to turn the thing over, you'd see that it's flat. This surface is called the “foot” though of course there's no foot as we know it. Muscle contractions here are what help it to move. As it does it secretes a layer of mucus which makes the travel easier and prevents damage to the tissues on that foot. (Wikipedia pictures an “active slug” though one couldn't tell by looking.)

A slug is composed mostly of water which it absorbs primarily through the air. Lacking a full-sized shell, it's easy to get dried up. Their mucus helps it to survive and of course a good rain makes all good again. They're most active then. There is a tendency when their world dries out, to hide in damp places like tree bark, fallen logs, rocks and even our planters.

You may have noticed their "slime trail." If found by one of the same species, it could help it find a mate. Beware, however, for some carnivorous slugs will use it to locate dinner. Its mucus can make it difficult for some predators to pick one up while, in other cases, it's simply so distasteful that any who are tempted would wisely go someplace else to eat.

Slugs are hermaphrodites, having both male and female sex organs. Wikipedia isn't specific though I got the ideas that, after they've bred, both lay eggs.

So, once that's out of the way, what does a slug do for fun? They certainly eat which may be where you've encountered them. Returning to Wikipedia: "Slugs can feed on a wide variety of vegetables and herbs including flowers such as petunias, chrysanthemums, daisies, lobelia, lilies, daffodils, narcissus, gentians, primroses, tuberous begonias, hollyhocks, irises, and fruits such as strawberries. They also feed on carrots, peas, apples, and cabbage that are offered as a sole food source." Most will also feed on living plants, lichens, mushrooms, and even carrion. Some will eat other slugs and snails, even earthworms.

And of course, just about anything eats them. Even fish including the brown trout. Frog and toads are hungry predators as are lizards and snakes. Count our friendly garter snakes high on the list. Always have to watch out for the shortjaw kokopu though last I checked, the slugs around here are safe from that fish. Let's not, however, forget the birds: common blackbirds, starlings, owls, vultures and ducks. Add redwings, thrushes, rock doves (we call them pigeons) and game birds. As if that weren't enough to cause a slug a major depression, foxes and hedgehogs are also hungry for these little creatures.

In what little time they safely have, I wonder what slugs do for happiness. I've observed they are on the move, albeit very slowly.

So why does a slug cross the road?

Ask the chicken.

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