



Domain	Eukaryota
Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Mollusca
Class	Gastropoda

MOLLUSCS

Gastropods

490 MYA – PRESENT

Gastropods are a large class in the phylum Mollusca and are familiar to most people as snails and slugs. Some have a shell that is coiled, like a garden snail, or a low cone, like a limpet. Some gastropods do not have external shells and are commonly called slugs.

Gastropods are soft-bodied animals which have a well-developed head with a mouth, tentacles and sometimes eyes. Gastropods also have a large foot, specialised for creeping along rocks, leaf litter, trees, or the sea floor.

Fossil Record

Gastropods first evolved in the late Cambrian and were initially exclusively marine animals. By the Carboniferous, some had evolved to live on land.

Habitat and Lifestyle

Gastropods live in extraordinarily diverse habitats extending from the tropics to the poles. They live on land in forests, grasslands, deserts, mountains, and gardens, in freshwater lakes and rivers, on mudflats, and in estuaries. They also live in the ocean, along the shore, in reefs, in shallow water and in deep water down to the abyssal depths of the ocean. They even live near hydrothermal vents along the mid-ocean ridges.

Most gastropods feed by grazing on algae, seaweed or leaves, but a few gastropods are carnivorous and attach to the shells of other molluscs to bore a hole and suck out the animal within, or use their muscular foot to force apart bivalve shells. Others have powerful stings which have been known to paralyse people.

Fossilisation

Gastropods fossilise as preserved shells, internal and external molds, as well as casts.



Gastropod, *Fasciolaria cristata*, Early Miocene (about 20 million years old), Victoria. Image from Chris Fitzgerald.



A very large specimen of the Australian trumpet, *Syrinx aranus*. Image from deepseanews.

DID YOU KNOW



The largest known gastropod is the 'Australian trumpet', which has been measured at 91 cm long and weighing up to 18 kg. It is found around northern Australia, eastern Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea, and is a predator that feeds on large worms.

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