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RSPB first book of pond life

Derek Niemann

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Pond life

All sorts of creatures live in ponds and around them. Some stay on the surface. Some swim in the water. And some even walk on the bottom!

This book will help you name many of the animals you see in ponds. Find out if a pond skater really skates. And discover the spider that lives under water.

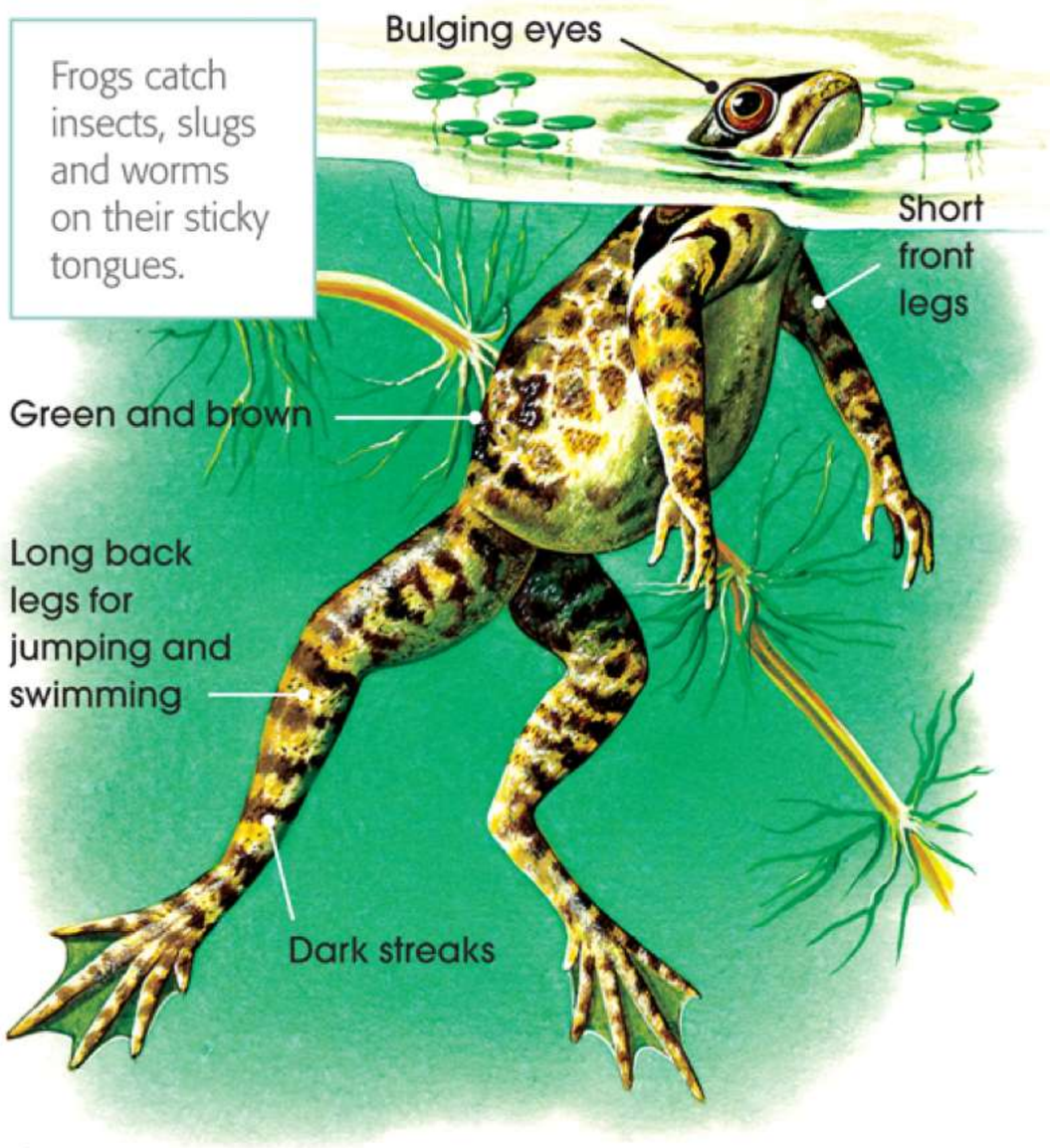
At the back of this book is a Spotter's Guide to help you remember the pond creatures you find. You could also draw them. Take a grown-up and go pond watching!

Turn the page to find out more about pond animals!

Common frog

Have you seen two big eyes sticking out of the pond? They belong to a frog. These animals can live on land and in water. They come to the pond in the spring to lay their eggs.

Frogs catch insects, slugs and worms on their sticky tongues.



Common toad

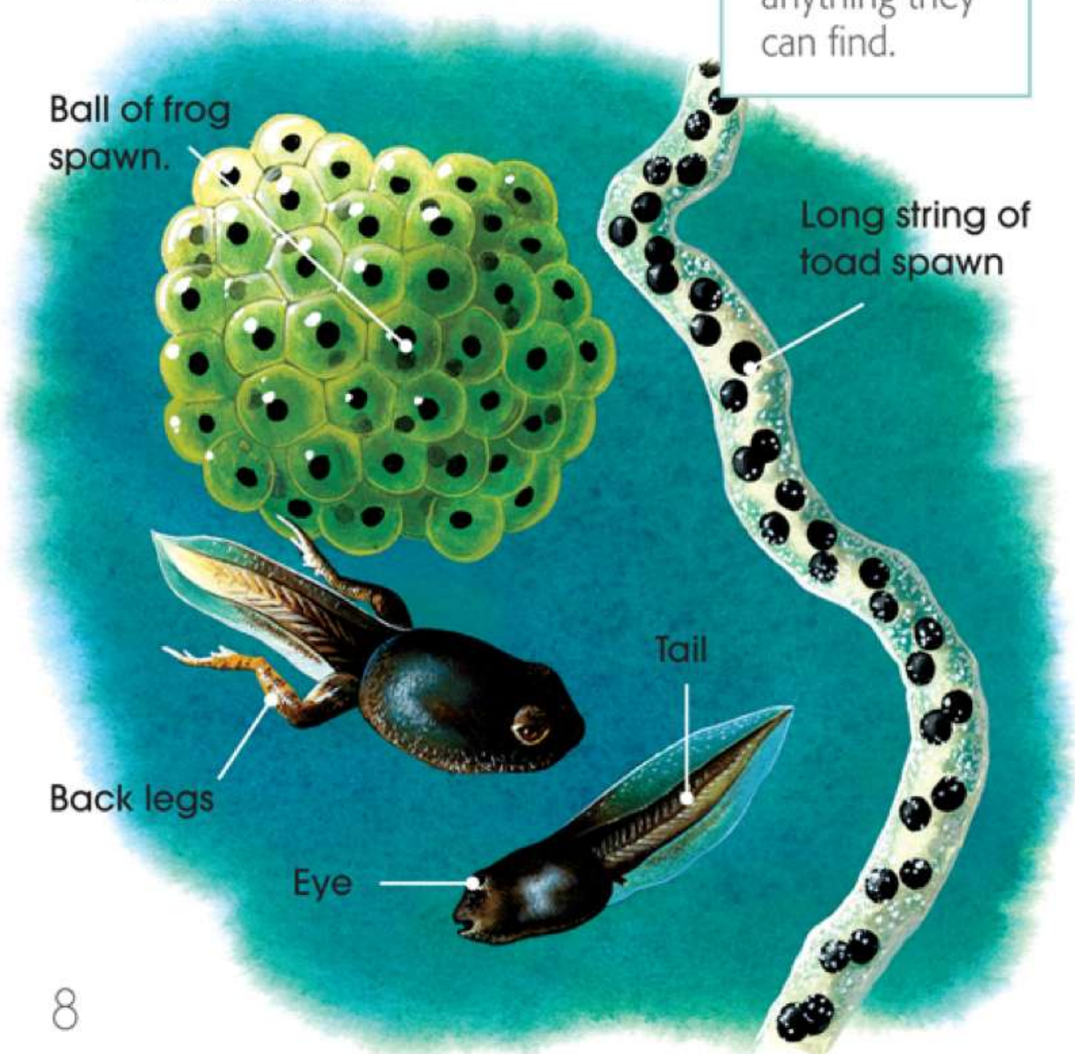
A toad looks like a frog with bumpy skin. Just like frogs, they lay their eggs in ponds in the spring. Toads like deeper ponds than frogs.

Toads spend the winter under logs or big stones in a deep sleep.

Tadpoles

Frogs and toads lay eggs in jelly, called spawn. The eggs hatch into tiny creatures with tails, called tadpoles. The tadpoles get bigger, grow legs and lose their tails. They have turned into frogs or toads.

Very young tadpoles eat plants. As they grow, they eat anything they can find.



Smooth newt

These animals look like lizards. They swim through the pond, flicking their long tails. Newts eat tadpoles and other water creatures.

A baby newt is called an eft.

Great crested newt

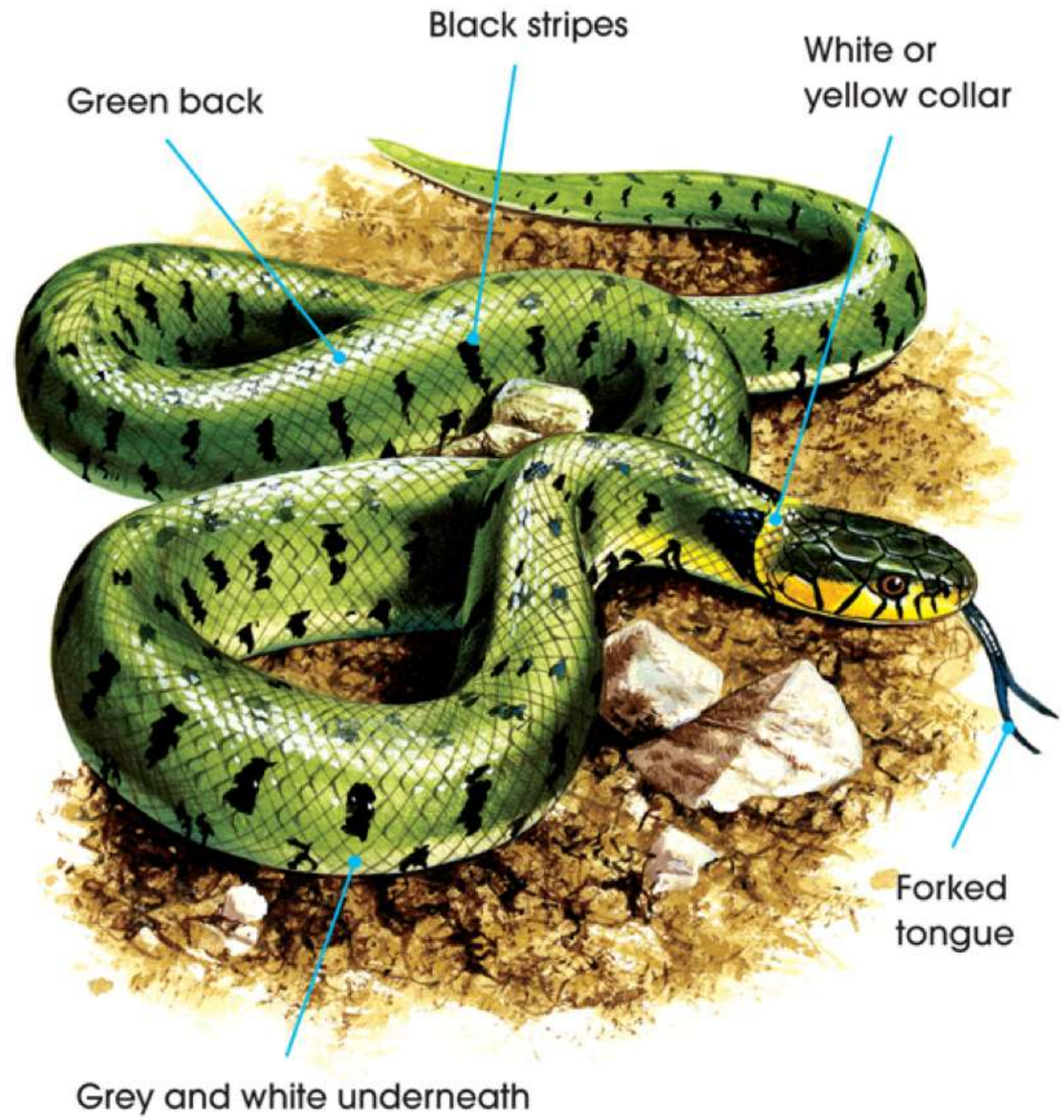
This is a very big dark newt – as long as a grown-up's hand. It has a huge crest down its back. It is very rare too. You are lucky if you see a great crested newt.

Male newts grow their crests in spring. Females don't have crests.

Grass snake

You might see this snake swimming in the pond. It is looking for frogs, toads or tadpoles to eat.

The grass snake is the biggest snake in Britain, but it is harmless to us.



Hedgehog

After dark, hedgehogs come to the pond for a drink. They eat slugs, worms and beetles. All that food makes them thirsty.

Hedgehogs sometimes fall into ponds. They can swim, but they need a slope so they can climb out again.

Spines

Pointed snout

Mallard

If you see a duck on a pond, it is probably a mallard. It puts its beak in the water and eats pondweed.

Only the female quacks. The male makes a 'rab, rab' noise.

Female is brown with dark streaks

Brown beak

Yellow beak

Male has a green head

Heron

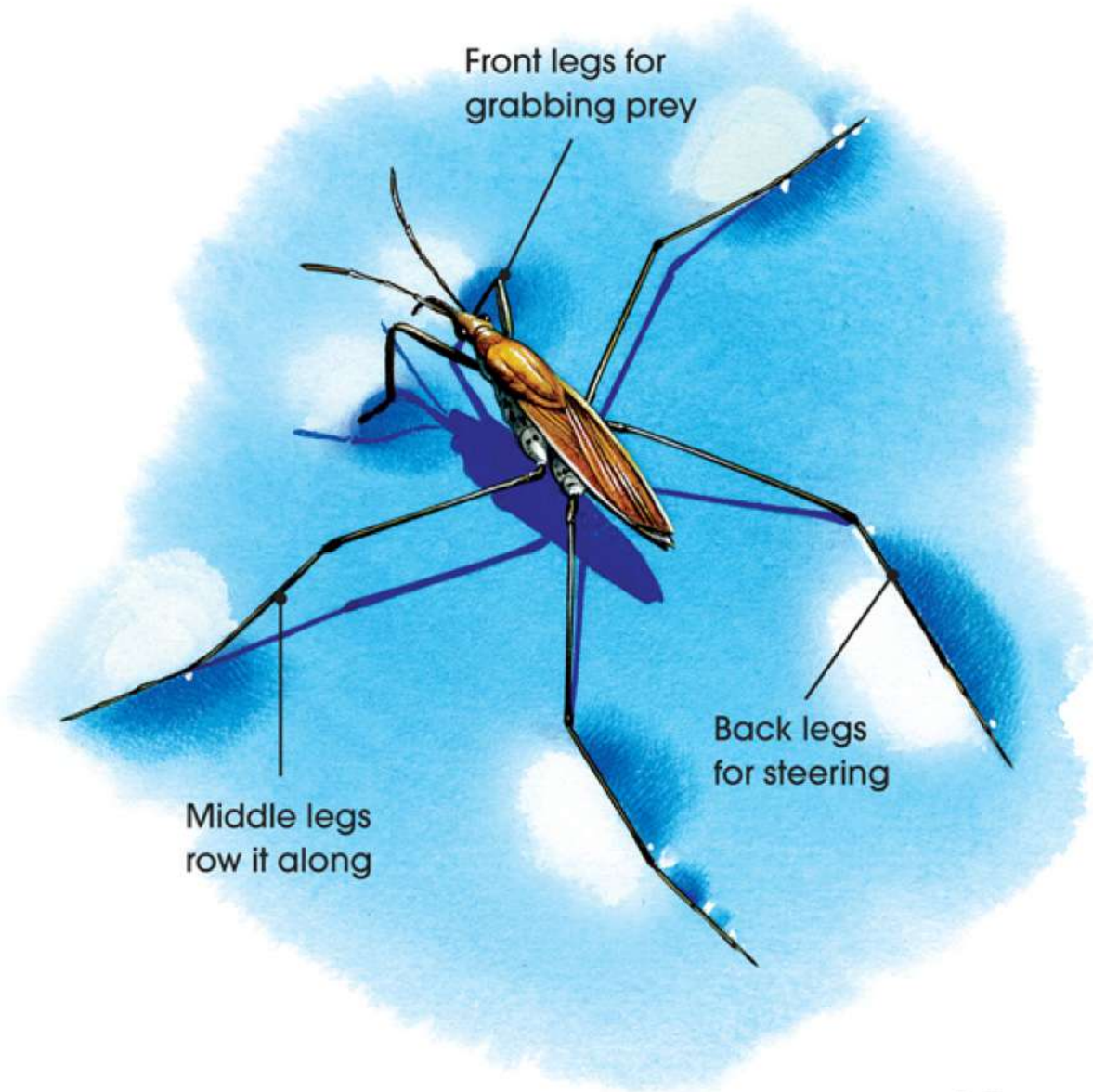
This big bird has long legs and a very long beak. It comes to the pond looking for fish and frogs to eat.

The heron makes a noise that sounds like 'frank'.

Pond skater

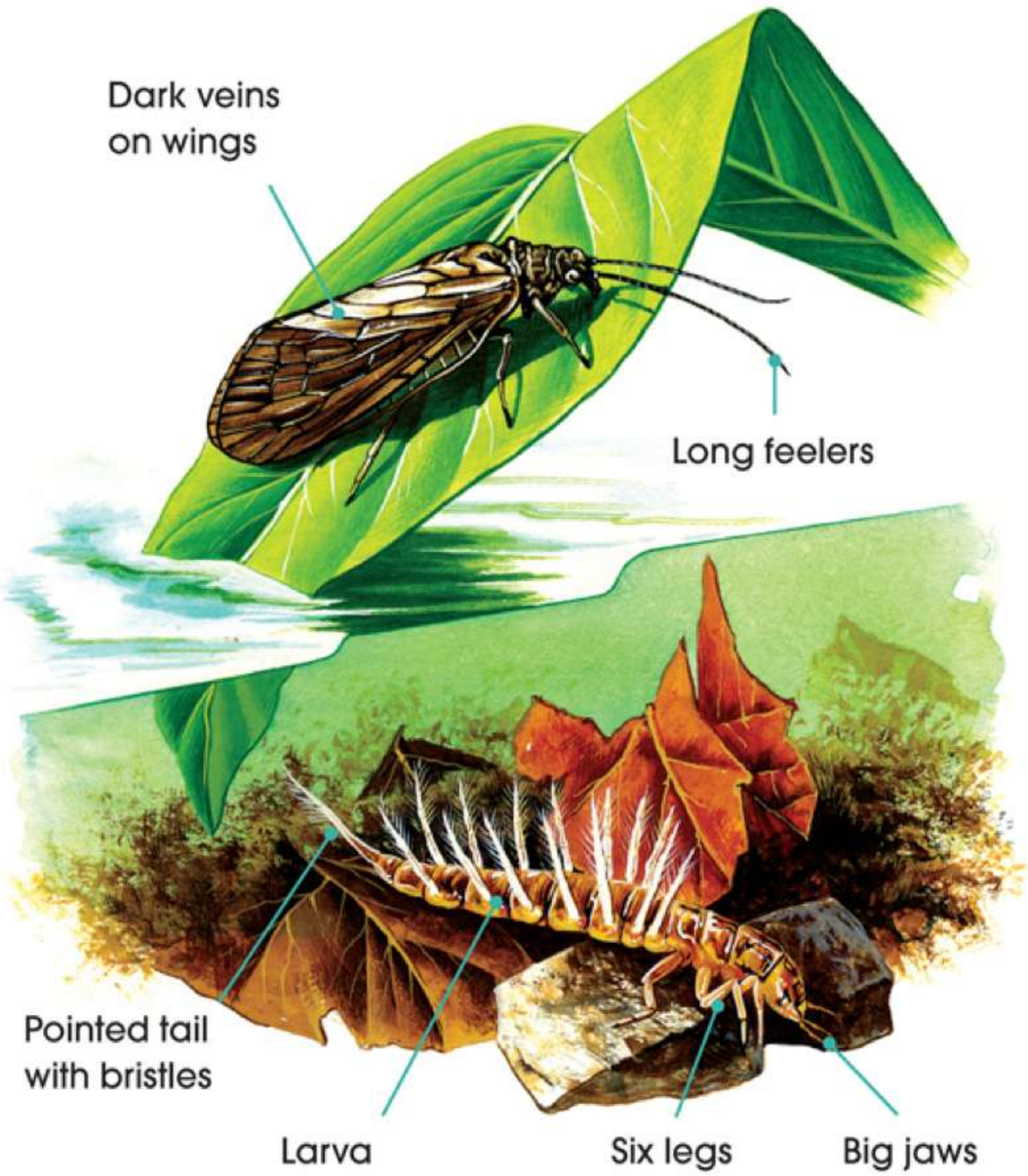
This insect does what its name says. Look for it skating over the surface of the pond with its legs spread out.

The pond skater catches insects that land on the pond surface.



Alderfly

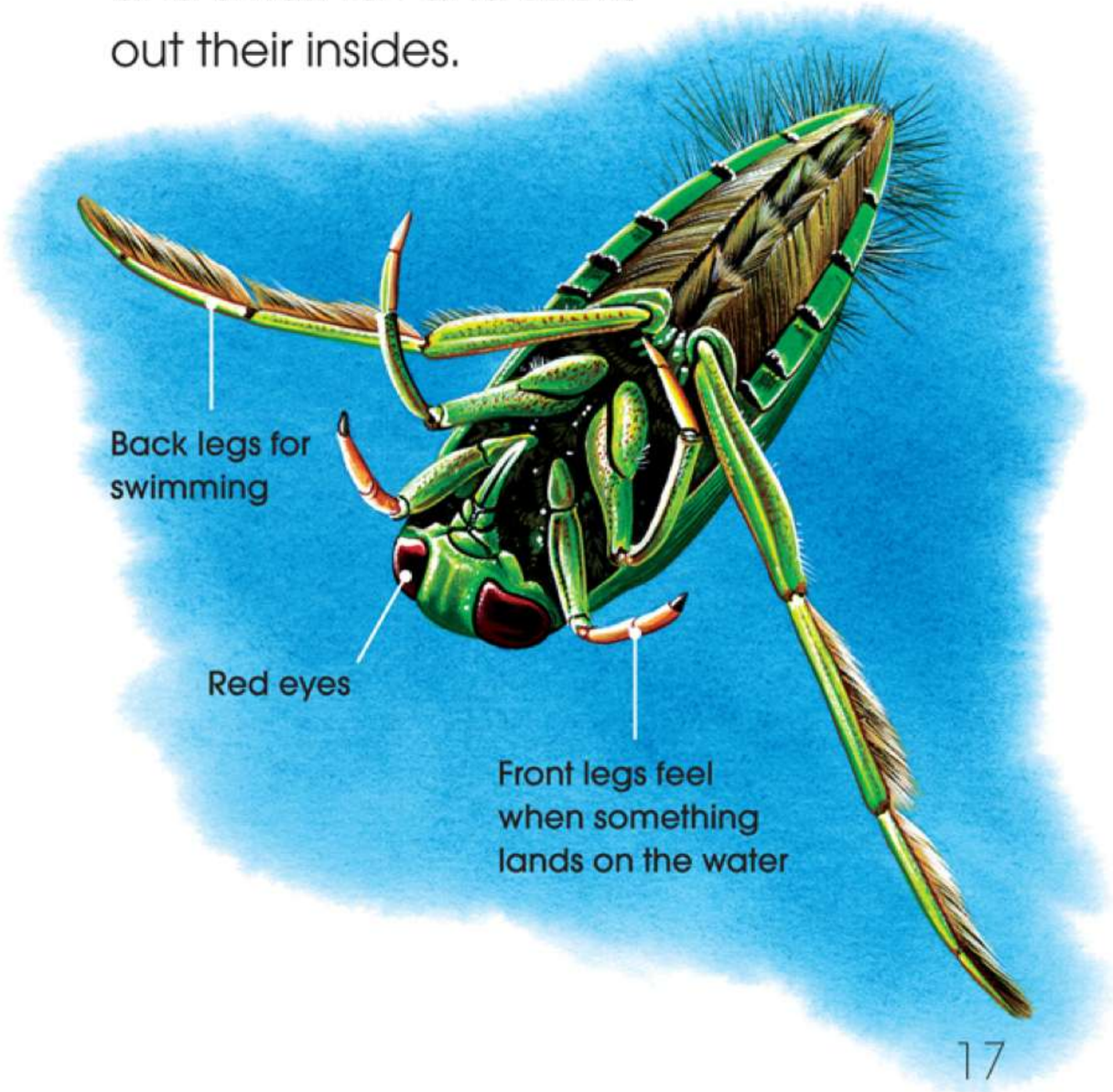
This insect lays its eggs on plant stems. When the larvae hatch, they jump into the water. The larvae live at the bottom of the pond.



Backswimmer

This hunter floats on its back. It swims very fast using its long back legs as paddles. It sticks its sharp beak into tadpoles and small fish and sucks out their insides.

The backswimmer is also called the greater water boatman.



Lesser water boatman

This bug moves through the water using its back legs like oars. It usually stays near the bottom of the pond.

Flat body

Back legs look like oars

Dark above, light below

Big eyes

Smaller front legs

It sucks up food through its hollow beak like a straw.

Great diving beetle

This is one of the best hunters in the pond. It can be bigger than your thumb. Watch the great diving beetle grab a tadpole or a fish in its big, strong jaws.

The diving beetle larva has huge jaws too. It breathes through its tail!

Male has a shiny, black shell

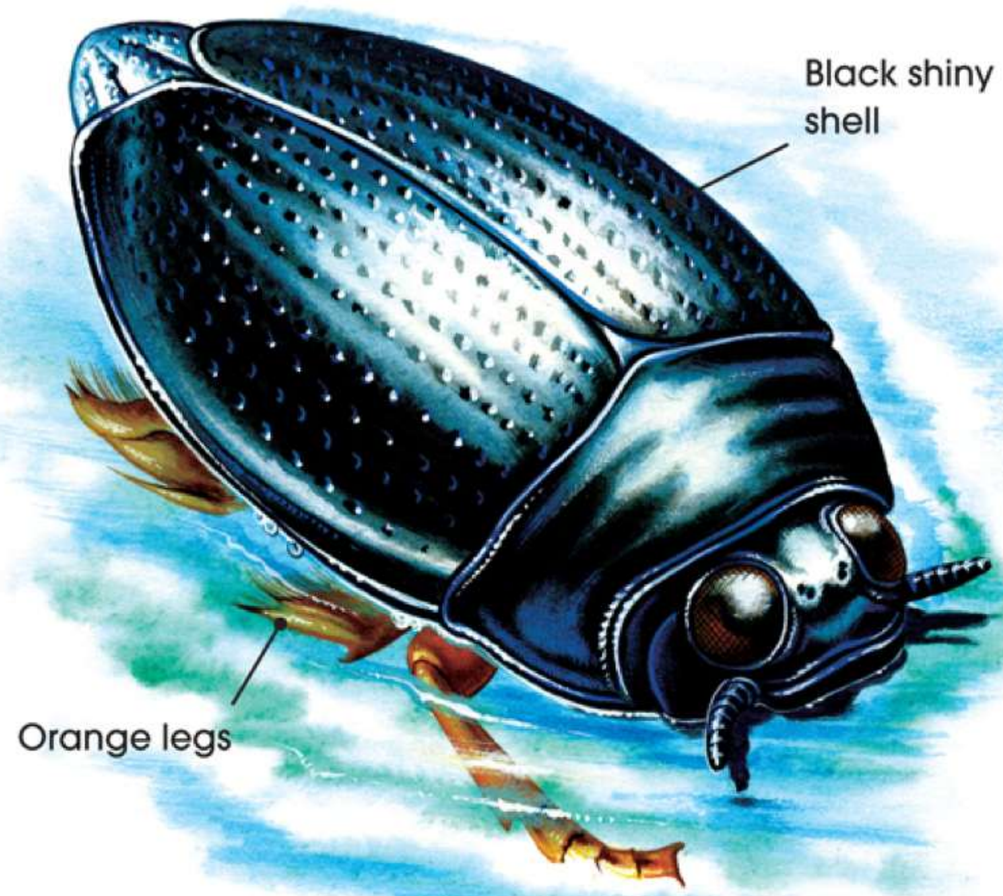
Female shell has ridges

Back legs for swimming

Yellow underneath

Whirligig beetle

Look for these tiny beetles on top of the pond. They swim round and round in circles. You usually find them in little groups.

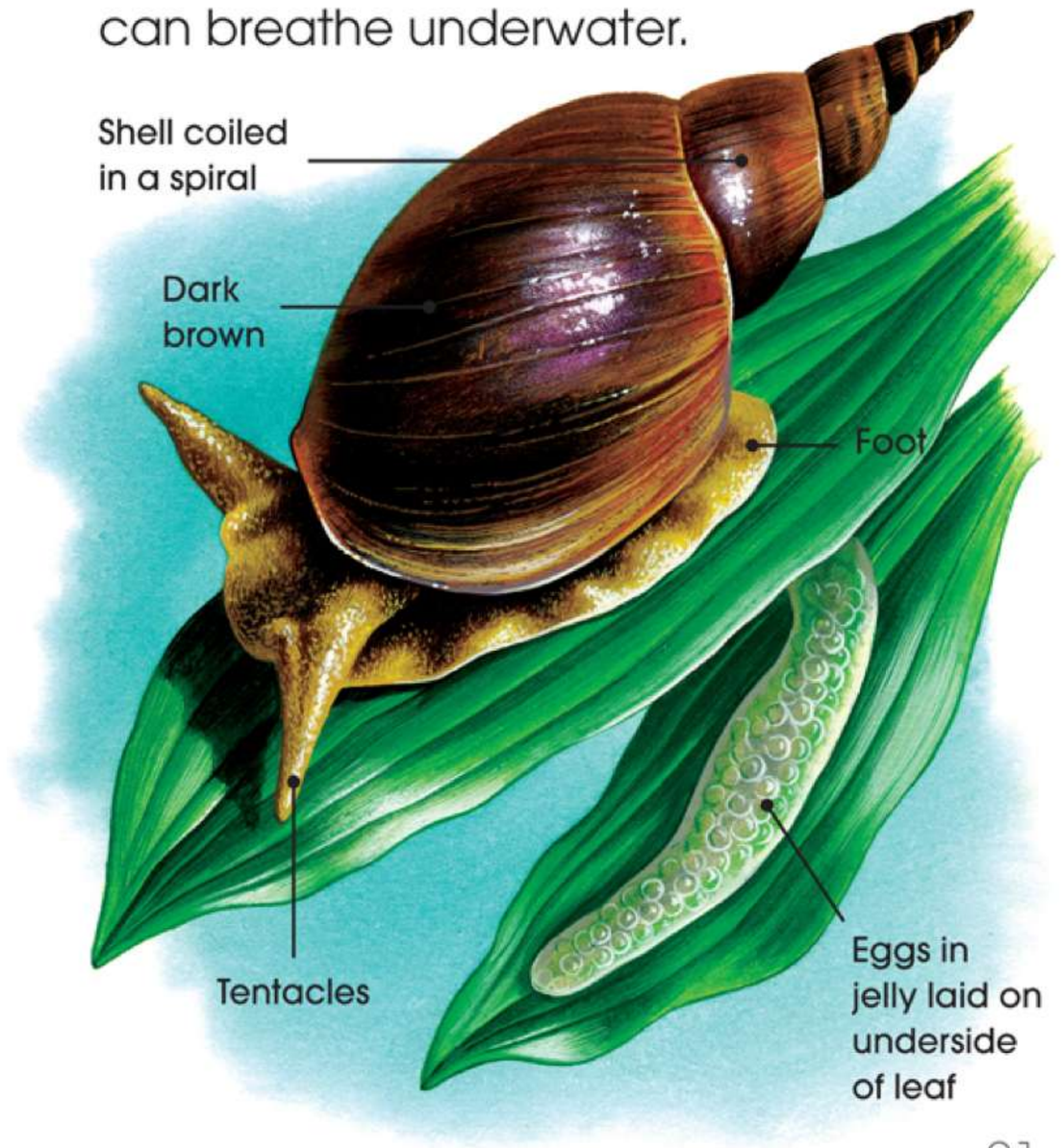


Whirligig beetles' eyes are split in two. The top half can see what's going on above the water. The bottom half watches for things under the water.

Pond snail

This animal's shell goes round in a spiral. It is pointed at the top. The snail keeps air trapped inside its shell so that it can breathe underwater.

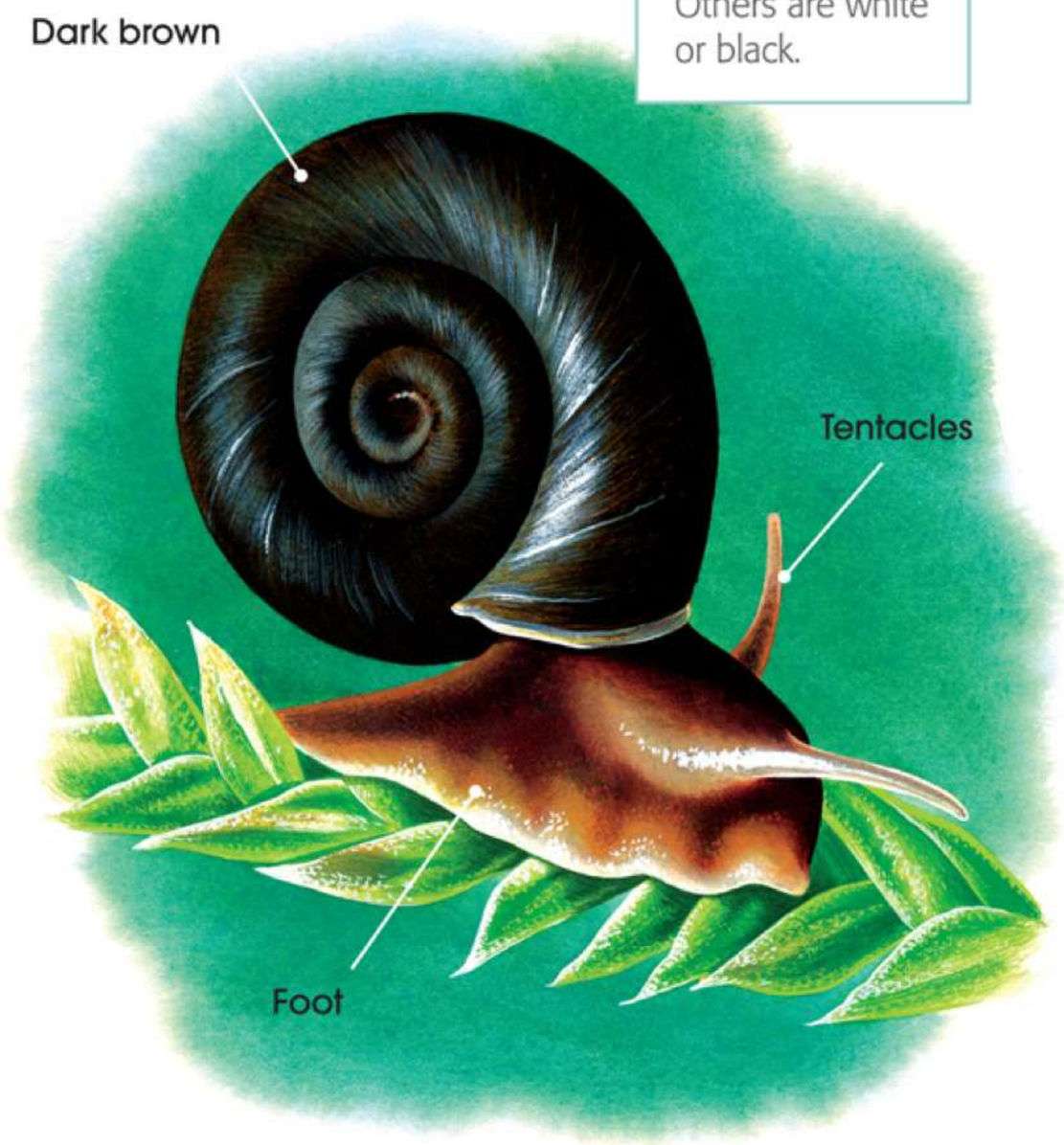
Pond snails have very rough tongues. They lick green algae off plants.



Ramshorn snail

This snail got its name from the shape of its shell. It is curled like a ram's horn. A ram is a male sheep.

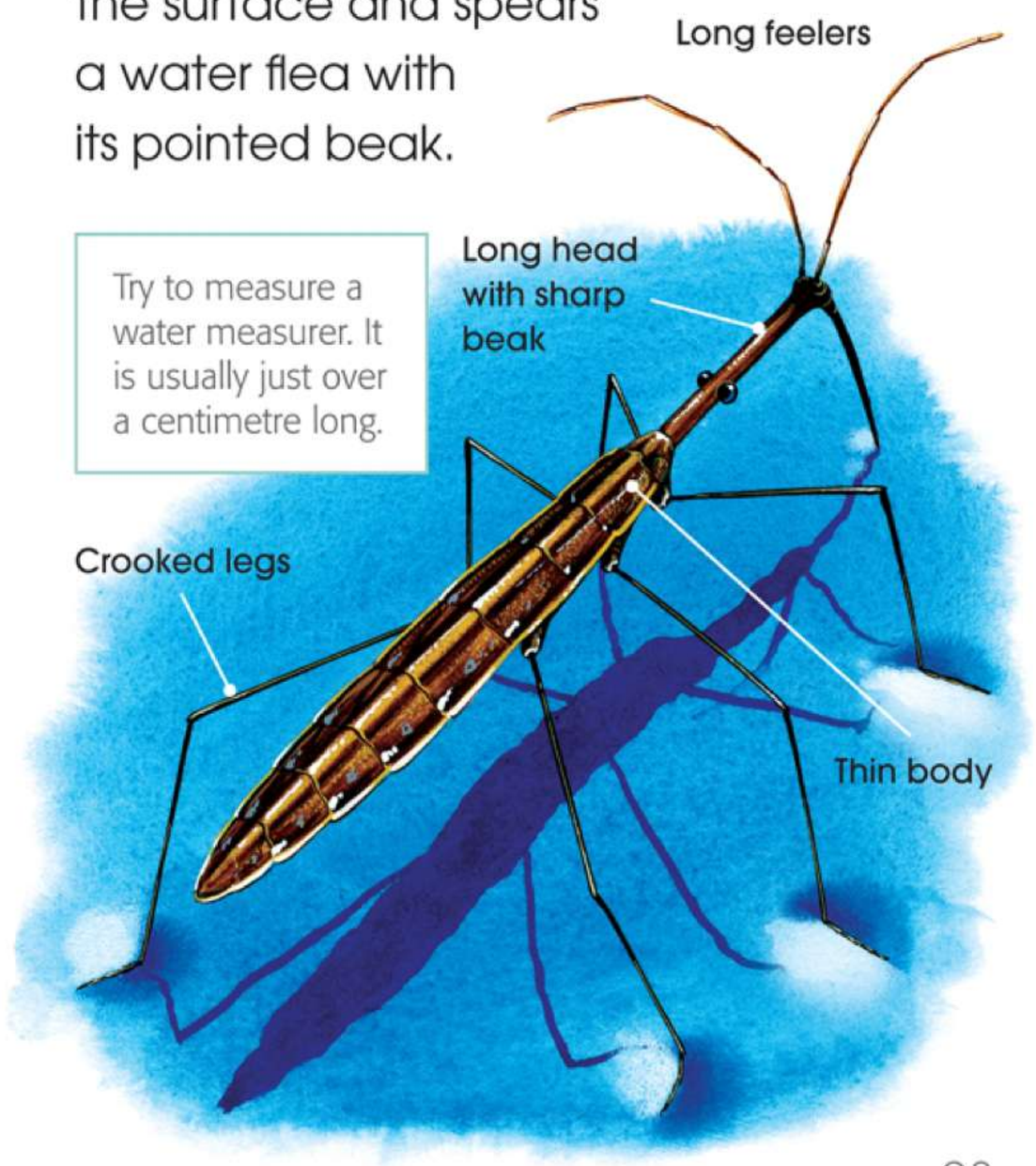
Some ramshorn snails are brown. Others are white or black.



Water measurer

Look near the edge of the pond for a small insect with very thin legs. The water measurer walks on top of the water. It dips its head under the surface and spears a water flea with its pointed beak.

Try to measure a water measurer. It is usually just over a centimetre long.



Water scorpion

The front legs of this bug are shaped like pincers. They are used for catching prey. The long tube sticking out of its bottom is used for breathing.

This bug has a thinner, longer relative called the water stick insect.

Flat body shaped like a leaf

Greenish-brown

Front legs like pincers. They are not dangerous to us!

Leech

A leech has suckers at both ends of its body. It gets around by swimming or moving from sucker to sucker. Some leeches live by drinking other animals' blood! Others swallow smaller creatures whole.

This fish leech is sucking blood from a minnow.

Four eyes

Suckers

Water spider

This spider breathes air but spends most of its life underwater. It makes a web in the pond plants. It fills its web with air bubbles from the surface so it can breathe.

Air bubble

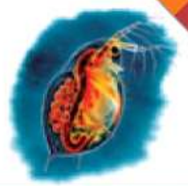
Head and middle joined together

Poison fangs

Eight hairy legs

The female lays her eggs in an underwater air bubble.

Water flea



Lots of tiny creatures swim about in the pond. They eat things that are too small for us to see. These see-through animals are called water fleas.

A water flea is the same size as a full stop on this page.

Head

Eggs

Eye

Red or green

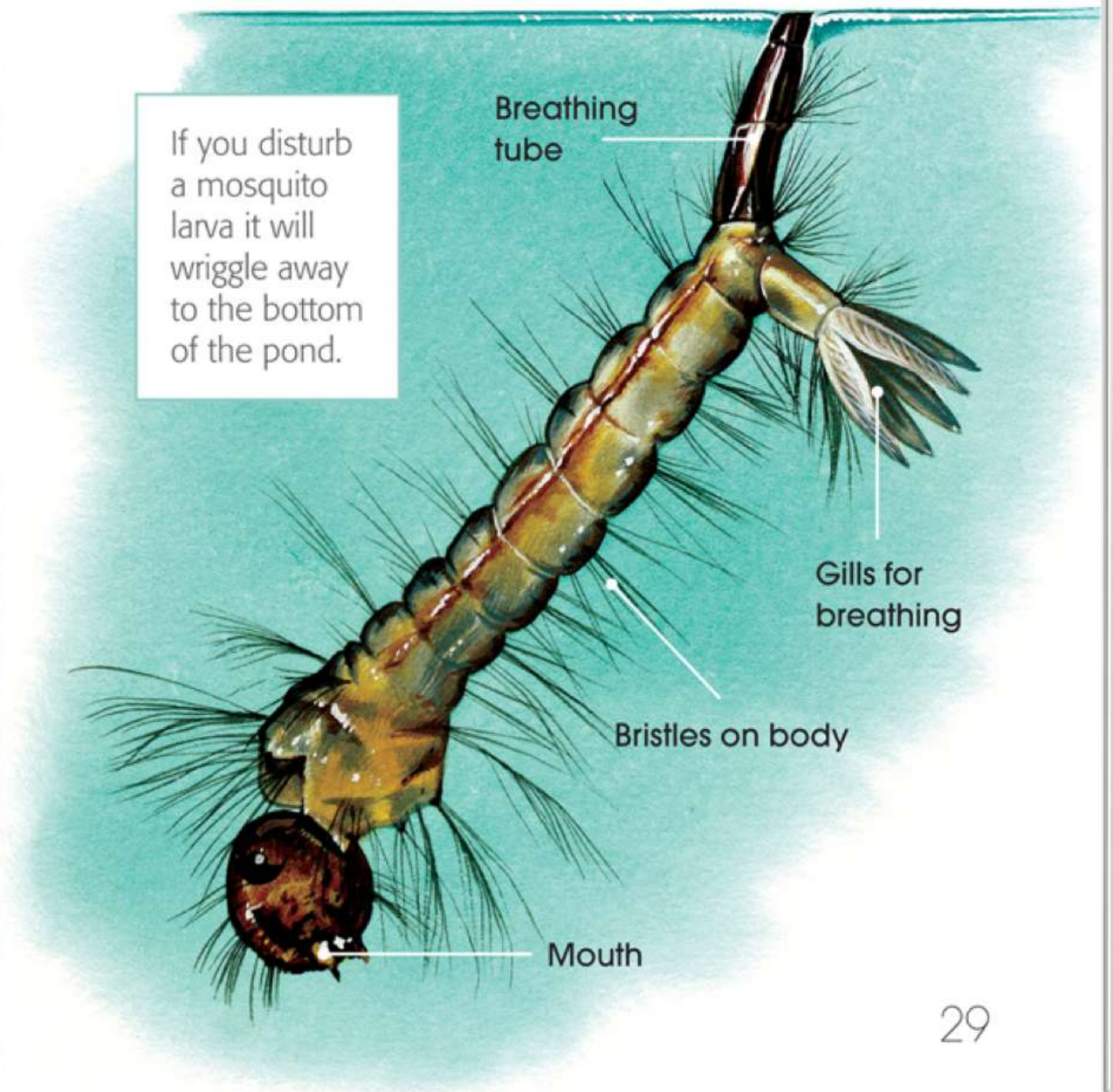
Caddis fly larva

Can you see a tube in the pond made up of tiny bits of leaves, twigs or stones? There is a caddis fly larva hiding inside. These animals make a cocoon for themselves. Then they stick bits of plants or twigs on it.

When it is big enough, the larva turns into an adult inside its case. The adult flies away at night. It looks like a moth with see-through wings.

Mosquito larva

Mosquito eggs hatch into larvae. The larvae hang down from the surface of the pond. They wait for food to float past then catch it in the little bristles around their mouths.



If you disturb a mosquito larva it will wriggle away to the bottom of the pond.

Stickleback

This is the smallest fish in the pond. It is also the only fish in the pond that makes a nest for its eggs. Sticklebacks look after their babies after they hatch.

Brown or green on top

Spines

Silver underneath. Red patch on males

Gills for breathing

Sticklebacks eat snails and insect larvae.

Bloodworm

What are those wriggly red worms in the pond? They are called bloodworms. But they are not worms. They are the larvae of midges – tiny insects that gather in big swarms in spring and summer.

Bloodworms turn into midges that do not bite.

Feathery gills for breathing

Stumps that act like legs

Flatworm

This animal suits its name. It is a very flat worm. It moves along on hairs that are too small for us to see. It is looking for tiny creatures to eat.

Some flatworms have eyes at one end. Some have eyes in their middle. Some have no eyes at all.

Usually on the underside of a floating leaf

Body is completely flat

Black or dark brown

Mayfly

Look at the three tails on this insect! The mayfly larva walks along the bottom of the pond, nibbling plants. It can live there for up to two years. But after it turns into an adult and flies away it will only live for a few days.

Many of these insects leave the pond on the same day in May. But some come out later in the summer.

Wings always held open

Very long tail streamers

Body bent upwards

Three tails

Feelers

Dragonfly

Often, a dragonfly will perch on a plant above the pond. Sometimes you can see a female flying over the pond. She dips her bottom into the pond again and again.
She is laying her eggs.

Dragonflies catch other flying insects in mid air.

Four wings stretched out

Big eyes

Long body

Dragonfly larva

The dragonfly larva has a bottom lip with a hook. The larva shoots out its lip and grabs a tadpole or another insect with the hook. The hook is usually hidden.

A dragonfly larva moves quickly by squirting water out of its bottom!

Huge eyes

Wing covers

Gills for breathing

Thick body

Damselfly

This dainty insect looks like a thin dragonfly. But watch when it lands. It folds its wings over its back. A dragonfly spreads its wings out.

Huge eyes

Wings folded over body

Very thin body

Damselflies don't fly as fast as dragonflies.

Damselfly larva

Damselfly larvae hide among the plants. They are waiting for water fleas or other little creatures to swim close enough to grab.

When it is time to turn into an adult, the larva climbs up a plant stem. Its skin splits open and a damselfly with wings comes out.

Thin body

Feelers

Six legs

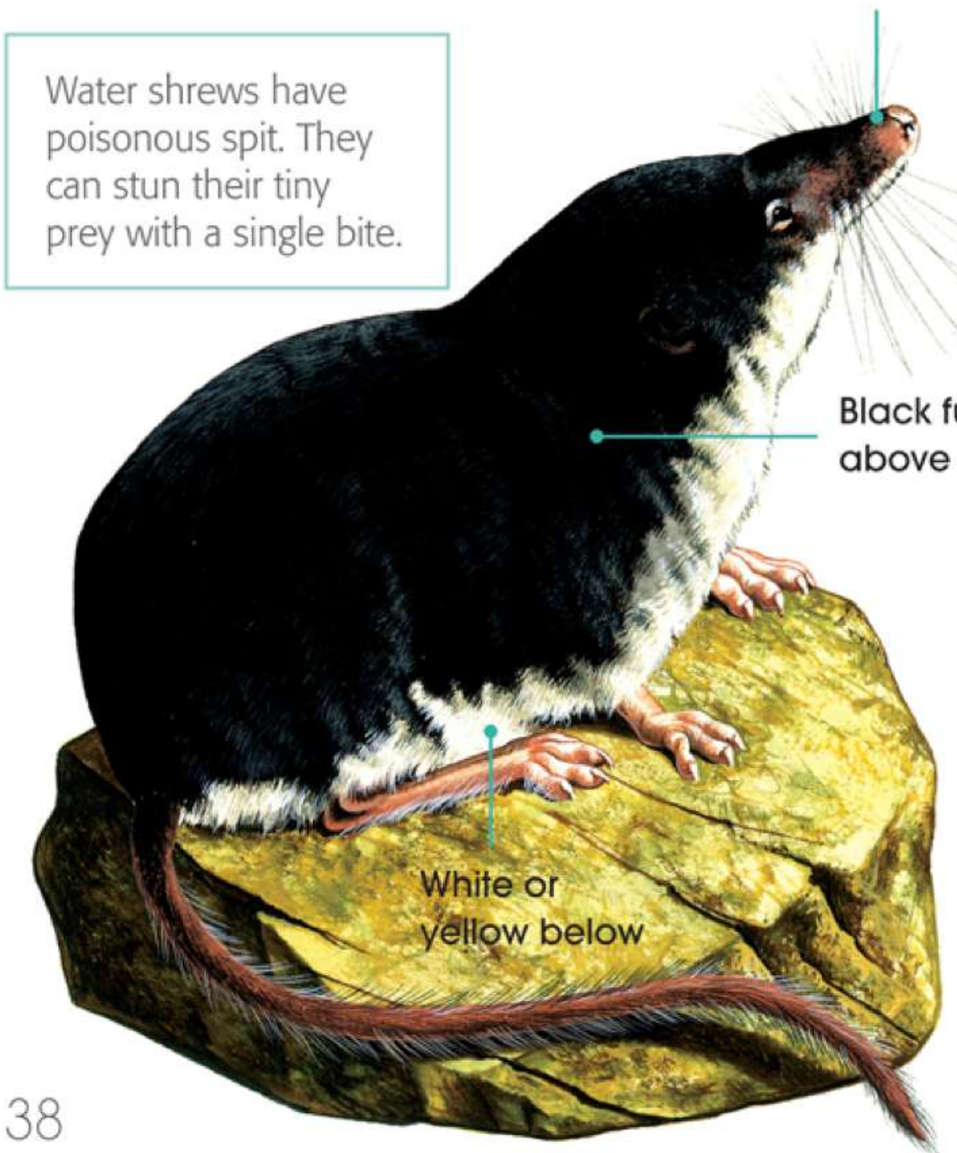
Feathery gills for breathing

Big eyes

Water shrew

This little mammal spends most of its life moving between rivers, streams and ponds. It never stays in one place for very long. In the pond, it dives underwater to eat newts and tadpoles.

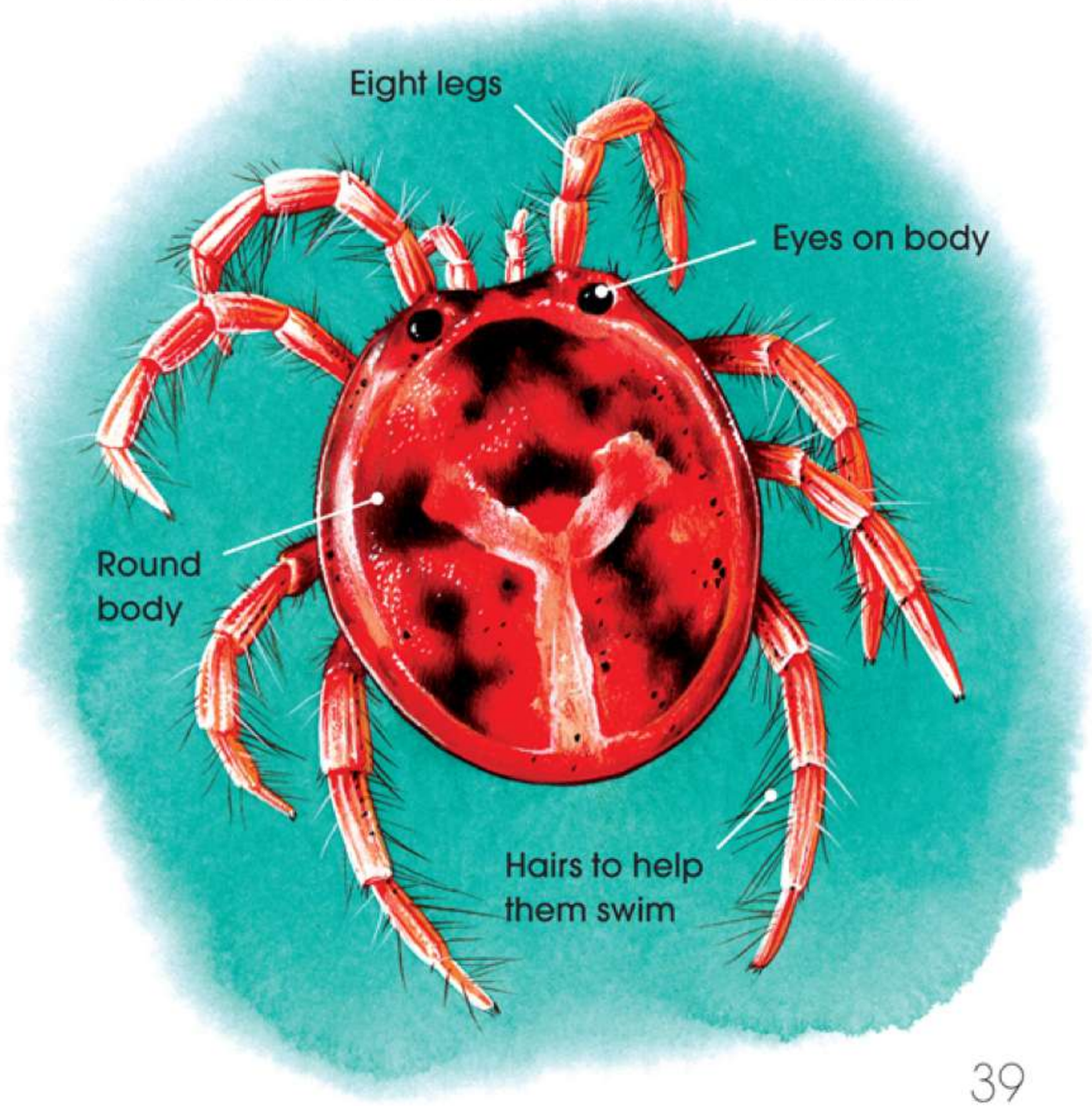
Water shrews have poisonous spit. They can stun their tiny prey with a single bite.



Water mite

Look for tiny red specks swimming near the surface. Water mites have eight legs, like spiders. They hunt other animals. They bite them and suck out their insides.

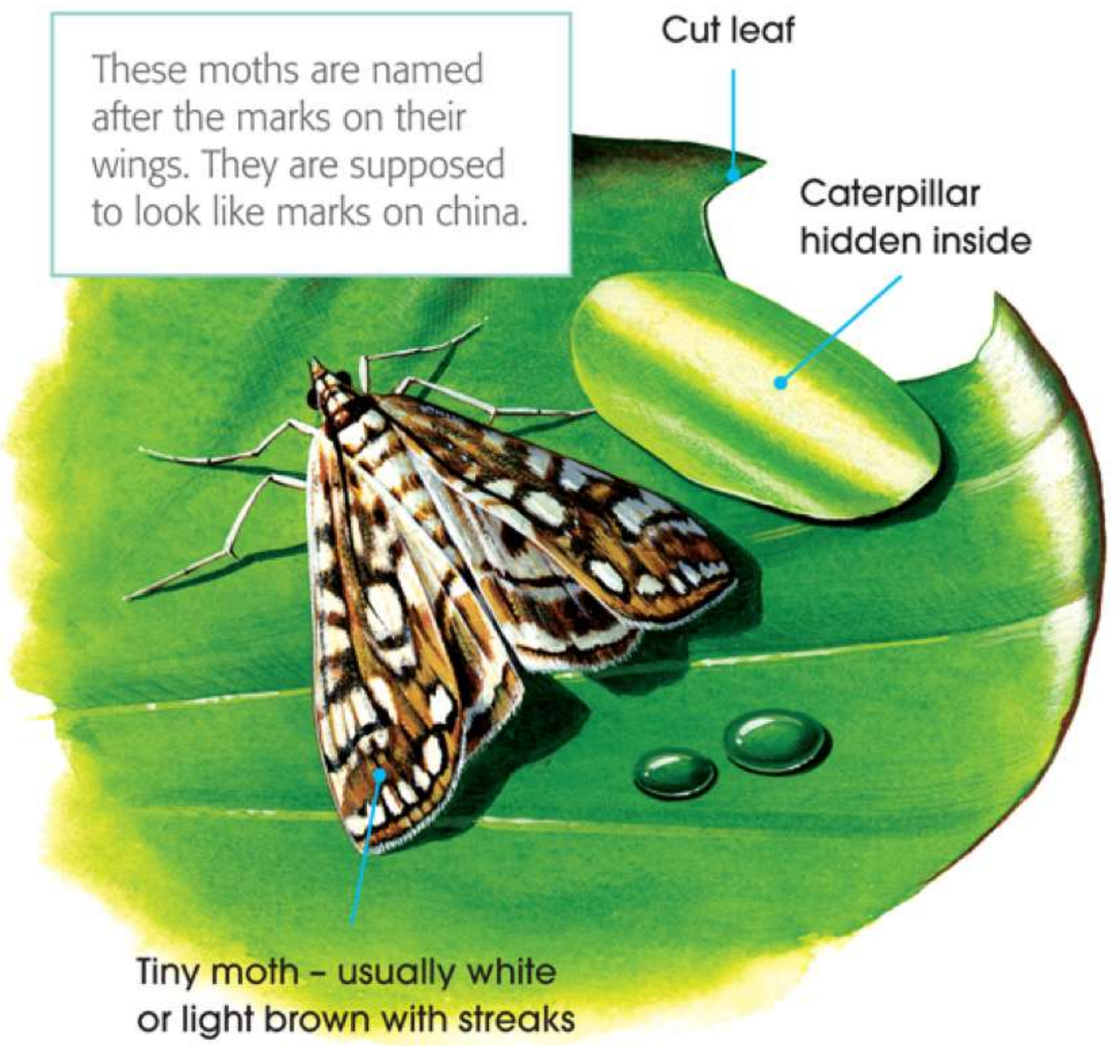
Unlike spiders, water mites can breathe in water.



China mark moth

China mark moths are very unusual. Their caterpillars live on floating plant leaves. The caterpillar cuts the leaf. Then it uses its silk to sew itself into a little leaf pouch. It sits inside and eats the leaf.

These moths are named after the marks on their wings. They are supposed to look like marks on china.



Useful words

bug an insect that has a beak like a sharp straw

cocoon a cover that an insect wraps around itself for protection

gills many animals that live in water breathe through gills rather than lungs

larva the young stage of an insect or other minibeast

prey an animal that is eaten by another animal

tentacle piece of a minibeast's body that sticks out like a feeler. The creature can feel, see or even eat with it.

Spotter's guide

How many of these creatures have you seen?

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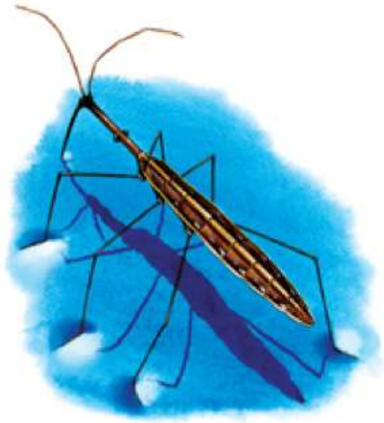

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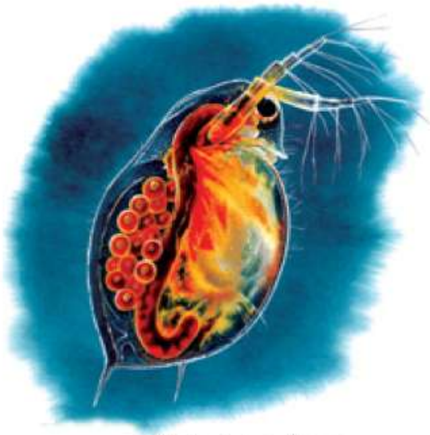

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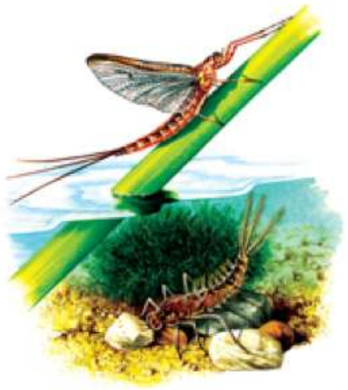

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