



leech

representative species

Kingdom: Animalia
Division/Phylum: Annelida
Class: Hirudinea

Features

Leeches range from less than one-half to three inches long. Unlike earthworms, they do not have setae (bristles) on the ventral (belly) side. A sucker is found at each end of the flattened, segmented body.

Natural History

Leeches live in water or moist habitats. Many are external parasites that suck blood, but some are scavengers, and others are predators. A parasitic leech makes a small cut on the host and uses a painkiller and an anticoagulant (substance that keeps blood from clotting) to keep the host unaware of its presence. A leech can feed quickly, swelling its body with blood. It may not need to feed again for several months. It can move by swimming or with an inch-worm type movement. It may travel between water bodies by attaching to mobile animals like turtles and birds. It is a hermaphrodite, producing both eggs and sperm, but at different times. Adults often remain with the eggs in the water. The body movements of the adults make a water current to bring more oxygen to the eggs. The young hatch as miniature leeches and attach to the adult until they first feed.

Habitats

Mississippi River; Missouri River; interior rivers and streams; natural lakes and prairie marshes; wet prairies and fens; bottomland forests; constructed lakes, ponds, and reservoirs; temporary water supplies

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001.
Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats CD-ROM.