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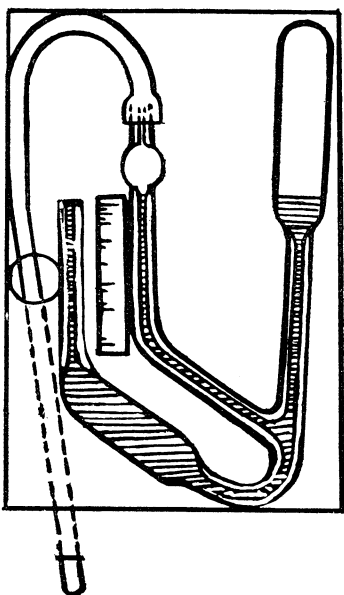
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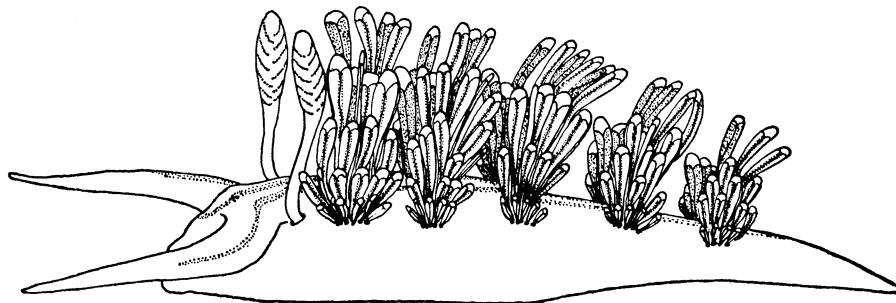
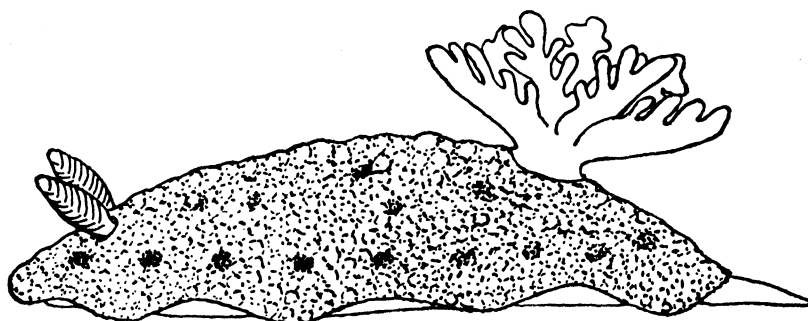
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SNAIL WITHOUT SHELL

nature note

Nudibranch



Intertidal Invertebrates of the Central California Coast

In tropical seas, the soft-bodied nudibranch creeps gently over seaweeds and hydroids, browsing upon coelenterates (jellyfish) and bryozoans (moss animals).

A nudibranch is a snail without a shell. The baby nudibranch is born with a shell but sheds it a few weeks later and spends the rest of its life creeping around on its stomach with its breathing apparatus or gills exposed, sometimes in a delicate feathery outgrowth on its posterior end. This gives the creature its name: Nudi means naked, and branch means gill.

Nudibranchs are members of a large class of creatures in the shellfish kingdom called Gastropods, the snails and slugs.

The nudibranch is among the most beautiful of all shellfish, although not many people know about it, for it is small and shy, lurking under protective rocks. These creatures of the sea can be striped, spotted, lined, dotted, dashed, ringed with every conceivable color of the rainbow—red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet—and a few extra colors such as jet black, white and brown. The colors are best seen while the slug is alive

and in its natural habitat. Once the animal is pulled from the sea, the colors fade and the slug collapses.

Nudibranchs are found in all oceans, but mostly in the tropical seas, although a few inhabit the cold polar waters. Some swim and move around rapidly, while others move sluggishly. Certain slugs such as the deep violet blue Glaucus creep along the underside of the surface film of the water.

Hardly any animal will eat a nudibranch. Fish may take them in their mouths, but they quickly spit them out. The nudibranchs, however, eat many kinds of seafood. They have a variety of teeth for that purpose—some have thousands of individual teeth called radulae, others have only 10 or 15 teeth, and still others have no teeth at all but suck up their food. Moss animals, algae and sponges are eaten by these sea slugs. Some thrive on certain jellyfish, from which they absorb the live stinging cells or nematocysts and store them in their own bodies. The nematocysts migrate to the tips of special branching appendages on the backs of some slugs and protect their new hosts by stinging any enemy that touches them.