



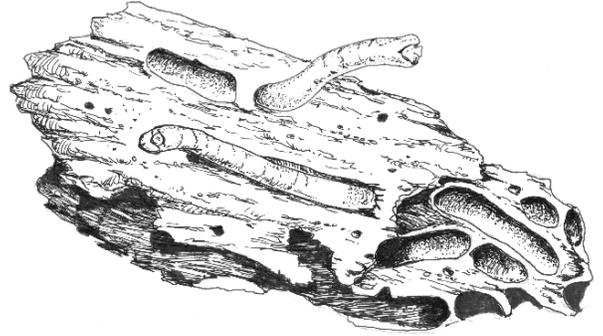
Shipworms – Termites of the Bay

What are they?

Shipworms aren't worms at all, despite their name. They are actually a special kind of clam with a very long soft body. These bivalves have two shells at one end of their body. But, instead of using their shells for protection, shipworms use them to scrape away wood.

What do they look like?

Adult shipworms are about the same size as pencils. They have small shells at one end of their bodies. When they are very young (in their larval stage), they settle on pieces of untreated wood. They bore into the wood, creating long tunnels as they eat the wood and grow. The wood protects and supports their soft bodies.



Where can you find them?

The most common shipworms found in the Chesapeake Bay—Gould's shipworms—do not tolerate fresh water. However, they can live in areas where salinity (the amount of salt in the water) is low. You can find them nested in any piece of untreated wood—including piers and boat hulls.

How do they behave?

For hundreds of years, shipworms have been called termites of the sea. Just like termites, they burrow into wood, creating long tunnels. The tunnels eventually weaken and destroy the wood. Many docks and piers have collapsed as a result of the shipworm's activities.

Larval shipworms enter a piece of wood through a tiny opening. As they eat the wood, they start to grow and develop soft bodies that look very much like worms. However, they are always attached to the tiny opening. They push their two siphons through the hole. They use one siphon to draw in microscopic plankton from the water. They use the other one to push out undigested bits into the water.

What do they eat?

Shipworms have found a way to break down wood into food their bodies can use to survive and grow. They also filter small plankton from the water they draw in with their siphons.

What eats them?

Larval shipworms can be the prey for any animals that feed on plankton, such as clams and oysters. However, the adult shipworm has few—if any—predators.

Creature Feature

Unlikely as it seems, shipworms have an unusual place in Maryland history. The *Dove*, one of two ships that brought the first Maryland colonists to the area, was a victim of its destructive habits. The ship was forced to stay in the Rappahannock River after it first came to Maryland. Shipworms invaded the boat, ruining its wood hull and making it very leaky. When the ship finally sailed back to England, it sank. Everyone on board drowned.