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Springtails (Collembola)

The springtails, or Collembola, are tiny animals named for their ability to jump. There are around 250 species in Britain, representing an ancient group of primitive insects, examples of which have been found as fossils 400 million years old. There is some debate among scientists as to whether or not they are true insects. Springtails are one of the most widespread and abundant groups of insects living in terrestrial ecosystems. Their scientific name is derived from the Greek colle (glue) and embolon (piston), referring to a ventral tube on their underside. This is filled with fluid which helps the springtail to stick to surfaces and in righting themselves after jumping. The jumping organ is known as the furca, which is normally folded under the body, held in place by a catch. Springtails jump by releasing the catch to drive the furca into the ground. They can spring into the air in a fraction of a second when disturbed.

Springtail
Tomocerus longicornis

Fact File

In 1996, fire fighters in Austria were called out to clean up a chemical spill on a road to discover that the patch was in fact several million springtails.

The male of the springtail Deuterominthurus pallipes, common in gardens in the south of England, entices his mate to pick up his packet of sperm by dancing and head-butting the female.

The smallest springtail is less than 0.2mm in length.

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