Wood bug information

Name and related animals:

Wood bug, wood louse, roll poly, pill bug, sow bug (and many other names).
There are many different species of wood bugs, and they live all around the world. Only some of them can roll into a ball.
They are a Crustacean (like shrimp, crabs and lobsters) in their own group of animals called Isopods.

Body structure:

Wood bugs do not have bones, but a hard covering or 'exoskeleton'.
Segments are clearly seen along their body length.
14 legs.
Two antennae on the head (for smelling and feeling in front of them).
Two very small black eyes, at the base of the antennae.
At the tail end, they have a pair of spiky uropods. In other Crustaceans the uropods are wider and used for swimming (see the 'tail fan' of shrimp). I have not found a clear use of them in wood bugs.

What they eat:

They're mainly scavengers, eating decaying plants and dead animals. Occasionally they eat living plants, if they are tender enough.

How they breathe:

They have gills (located at the bases of their legs), and use them to extract oxygen from moisture in the air. (Fish and other water-living animals also have gills. We have lungs which extract oxygen from the air.)
Hence, wood bugs need to stay in a damp environment, with lots of water in the air. If they are in dry air for too long, they die.
Wood bugs have gills because they evolved from ocean crustaceans, like shrimp. Through their evolution, wood bugs became land animals, but they retained their gills.

What eats them:

They are prey for spiders and centipedes, as well as frogs, lizards and small mammals e.g. shrews and moles.
Wood bugs are camouflaged to look like the wood and dead leaves they live in, to hide from predators.

Where they live:

On the soil among dead leaves, under decaying logs and under rocks.

How they grow and have babies:

They 'grow out' of their exoskeleton as they get larger. A new, soft exoskeleton grows underneath the old one. When they shed the old one, half of their body length at a time, the new, larger, exoskeleton replaces it. If half of a wood bug's body looks whitish, it is preparing to moult.

After mating, the female lays several dozen eggs, which she carries in a white package underneath her. The eggs develop for three or four weeks before hatching.
The eggs hatch all at once, and the babies are fully formed and independent, and white in colour. They are nearly invisible at first but grow fast.

Touching and moving wood bugs:

Please be very gentle with wood bugs as they are fragile - although their exoskeleton is hard, it can break if crushed. If possible, use a soft paintbrush to move them.