



WILDLIFE NOTES

Centipedes and Millipedes

Centipedes are among the more wiggly, sinuous and—to the unappreciative—repulsive creatures in the animal kingdom. Although they prefer damp solitude under a stone or log, they may also gravitate to moist areas in kitchens or bathrooms.

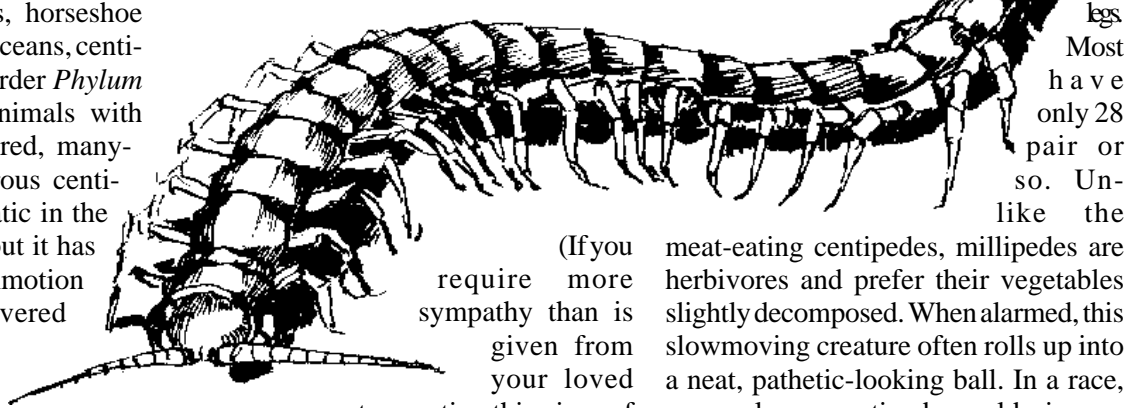
As do insects, spiders, horseshoe crabs, millipedes and crustaceans, centipedes belong to the large order *Phylum arthropoda*, invertebrate animals with segmented bodies and paired, many-jointed legs. The carnivorous centipede is comfortably dramatic in the context of a nature walk, but it has been known to cause commotion and screams when discovered under the bed or sink.

The centipede that we least like to find under our bed is the giant desert centipede, which can reach eight inches in length and range in color from olive to reddish brown. *Scolopendra heros* is seen throughout the Southwest, as well as in some southern states, in a variety of elevations and climates. In desert areas it is observed on summer nights or after moisture or rain has brought out its prey.

With 21 pairs of legs, the giant centipede uses its last pair to grip its victims, normally other insects, spiders, worms or wasps. Quickly curving backward, the centipede then embeds its front poison claws into the animal, which is held immobile until the venom takes effect.

The giant desert centipede is an aggressive predator, strong for its size, and surprisingly hard to kill. The bite of this nocturnal animal is often quite painful but not serious. The area around the wound may swell and become feverish. Any bite should be well cleansed and coated with antiseptic.

The centipede's sharp claws may also scratch the skin and cause irritation. These areas should be cleansed to prevent bacterial infection too. Anyone who fears an unusual reaction to insect bites should consult a doctor.



(If you require more sympathy than is given from your loved

ones, try quoting this piece of information: The bite of the largest centipede species—up to 12 inches long and found mainly in the tropics—has been known to kill mice and guinea pigs.)

A second centipede common to the Southwest is *Scutigera* spp. or the “house centipede.” Also known as the ghost centipede, this inch-long animated dustball infests buildings to prey on insects and spiders. It is mainly beneficial, with 26 legs that are unusually long relative to its body. High-speed cinematography reveals that these nervous and seemingly harried creatures are indeed capable of tripping over their own feet. The mouth parts and claws are usually too small to cause any damage to human skin.

For years, entymologists overestimated the importance of leg numbers and wrongly grouped millipedes and centipedes together. Today, we recognize millipedes (class *Diplopoda*) and centipedes (class *Chilopoda*) as having no more relationship than do spiders and horseshoe crabs.

Usually four to six inches long, brown or black in color and cylindrical, millipedes have a hardened exoskeleton and short antennae. Disappointingly, they do not possess 1,000

legs. Most have only 28 pair or so. Unlike the

meat-eating centipedes, millipedes are herbivores and prefer their vegetables slightly decomposed. When alarmed, this slowmoving creature often rolls up into a neat, pathetic-looking ball. In a race, even a clumsy centipede would win over a millipede, feet down.

Millipedes do have glands on their trunk sections that release pungent secretions. In some species, not common to the Southwest, the secretions can irritate the skin. Certain millipedes excrete a substance that smells unpleasant and leaves a temporary stain.

Like centipedes, millipedes are often seen after summer rains. Then they emerge in numbers from under rocks or piles of firewood.

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Conservation Education Section
Department of Game and Fish
PO Box 25112
Santa Fe, NM 87504
(505) 476-8119
