

In My Backyard: Centipedes: 100 Legs of Pain

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

Recently I posted an article on millipedes, or “thousand-leggers,” as we call them. Distantly related to millipedes is another multi-legged creature that we wish did not inhabit our environment: centipedes. We don’t have a cute name for these guys because, truthfully, they aren’t cute and cuddly. In fact, they are one of the most voracious predators in our desert, true carnivores. Whereas millipedes feed on decaying plant material, centipedes are strictly carnivores and will prey on insects, lizards, baby birds, toads, earthworms, an occasional tarantula, and anything else they can attack and subdue. Amazonian giants are so large they can leap into the air and bring down bats. But, should we be afraid of them?

As I’ve said for many of our neighbors in the desert, we probably should leave them alone and not molest them...their benefits far outweigh their dangers. But I have trouble saying that for centipedes. I was attacked (and I mean that literally) by a huge centipede in the foothills of Mt. Ord at Marathon as a young married man. I was on a ranch house remodeling job and we had moved an air conditioner unit away from an outer bunkhouse wall to paint behind it. After we set the unit down I noticed the head end of a huge centipede, about three segments, writhing around on the ground. We had chopped its head off in moving the unit, but the rest of its body was missing.

I moved into the bunkhouse to mix the paint and gather my brushes when I felt something wiggle in my left pants leg. I swiped at it with my hand and the sensation went away. A minute later I definitely felt it wiggling in my right pants leg. This time I paid more attention and grabbed it with two fingers through the pants leg. I knew instantly what it was and went into panic mode. It was racing around in my pants in the forbidden region and I knew nothing good would come of it. I jerked my pants down around my ankles and a foot-long centipede body, minus its head, fell out onto the floor, but it was definitely alive and raced back toward my pants to give me another go. It is embarrassing to tell this but I began hobbling backwards with my pants around my ankles, trying to get away from the devil. Every turn I made, it followed until I gathered my senses and bopped it with a short two-by-four. How it could “see” me with no head, I will never know, but it was hunting me, for sure.

One of my 3rd grade students was climbing a small tree in a North 1st Street yard and a huge red centipede crawled across his bare arm. He slapped it to knock it off and the legs punctured his skin. The next day at school, he had a double line of about 20 puncture marks, oozing a grey substance, almost like a burn scar. He was still in pain 24 hours later with nausea and a headache as well. It was not a good childhood experience for him (or me.)

I have always feared these monsters. My mother was sleeping one night when I was a kid and a smaller centipede fell off the ceiling and fell into bed with her. She rolled over on it and received a row of puncture wounds that got infected. And that wasn’t even a bite.

Actually centipedes don’t “bite.” They have about 40 body segments, each with a pair of sharp-pointed legs and venom glands. Because they are carnivores that crawl around in a dirty environment, punctures from the legs are more likely to cause a secondary infection or necrosis (dying tissue) around the wound, as my mother and Bubba Beddingfield found out. The first two legs are modified into “fangs” to deliver a large dose of venom. They grasp the prey with the other legs and insert the two “fangs” to subdue. It is a very effective hunting technique.

That also brings up another fact: even though “centipede” means “100 feet,” our two species really only have 80 legs, and they can be wicked weapons for the unwary or the stupid. Centipedes are extremely aggressive and one of

Texas Redheaded Centipede



Photo: Texas Parks and Wildlife

Banded Desert Centipede



Photo: DesertUSA

the few organisms that are not safe to handle, even by experts. They are fully and aggressively outfitted for hunting, and they don't care how big you are...they definitely are not cute and cuddly.

Centipedes have such primitive eyes that they can only detect light and darkness with them, so they use other signals to detect prey, such as touch, taste and movement of air currents. This means that whether daylight or dark, they know where you are.

Our two species are the Texas Redhead, with its black body and bright red head, and the Banded Desert Centipede, with its reddish orange body with a black band at the rear edge of each segment. They usually grow up to six or eight inches in length, but I have seen them at a full twelve inches. I have never seen a Texas Redhead, but the Banded Desert Centipede is prolific in the Big Bend and frequently seen at Marathon and Sanderson and probably everywhere else.

As far as reproduction goes, male centipedes are so shy that they usually never see a female. He will deposit his sperm in a packet on the ground and take off. Hopefully a female will find it and self-fertilize. She will lay about 20 or 30 eggs and usually covers them with loose soil and goes about her way, although some species are fierce mothers that will protect the eggs until they hatch, very carefully cleaning them to remove any bacteria or material that will harm the babies. When the babies hatch, they are miniature adults and can fend for themselves. They grow by shedding their skins and adding segments. As adults they usually molt once a year, but some will molt multiple times, growing larger with each molt. They can also replace missing legs with a molt. Centipedes can live for several years, and will seek a protected place to hole up for the winter.

One last thing: the two large appendages at the tip of the tail. Are they deadly, can they inflict damage or inject poison? Well, they are defensive appendages called "caudal legs." They are flexible enough to grab things and are used to grasp prey or to pinch would-be predators. If you rile up a centipede, sometimes they will arch their backs and raise the caudal legs in a defensive posture as a warning to stay away. Believe me they don't have to warn me of anything...centipedes are part of my unholy trinity of West Texas critters!

And what's in your backyard?