

In My Backyard: Millipedes – A Thousand Legs and a Putrid Smell

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

It was all lies! Everything my siblings told me as a small child growing up in Marathon, Texas, about “Thousand-leggers” was just not true. The little reddish-brown “worms” that crawled along the ground on waves of multiple little legs, especially after a rain storm, didn’t have a thousand legs at all, only 160. And that awful stench that rose into your nostrils if you molested one was not poisonous, just unpleasant. In fact, they wanted me to believe that the little critters, also called millipedes (literally, “thousand feet,”) were just as dangerous as their distant cousin, the centipede. Now, that’s a creature that can pack a pretty powerful bite with poison fangs, even though they are not deadly. But millipedes, it turns out, are harmless. To get the real story I had to throw out all the folk tales my brother and sisters told me and search for the actual truth.



As a child living on the edge of a town with open prairie and jagged mountains practically in my front yard, I became quite a naturalist. Frequent visitors to my area were millipedes, which can grow up to six or eight inches long. They don’t need camouflage since they have that bright coloring. They also move very slowly, not like their centipede cousins who can run up your pants legs in about two seconds (That is a sadly learned fact on my part.) They take their time, don’t get in a hurry, and if bothered by a potential predator (or a nosy 10-year old) they will stop and curl up into a flat disc that is difficult to pry apart without injury to the little guy.

The millipede body is interesting. It is a multi-segmented tube with each segment bearing two pairs of very short legs, which gives them about 40 segments. When they move, the legs move in waves to propel the body along. The head has a short pair of antennae which they keep close to their body. Each segment also has a pair of glands that emit a strong smelling chemical when irritated. Most of the 12,000 millipede species have those glands, but the chemical that is emitted is different between species. None of them are poisonous unless you have a reaction to it, although some species can burn you or cause skin or eye irritation. The worst our little guy does is to stain your hands with a brown, iodine-like liquid (and make you gasp for fresh air.)

Millipedes spend most of their lives underground. Even in hard West Texas soil they can burrow 18 to 24 inches down to live in a small chamber that is lined with millipede droppings. When our infrequent rains appear the millipede comes to the surface to feed on decaying plant matter and to find a mate. I have found millipedes climbing high into greasewood and mesquite bushes to escape flooding. Once the feeding-mating cycle is over they will return to the earth and probably not come back up that year, even for subsequent rains. It is here that they spend their winters. Millipedes can live up to six years.

Even though they can protect themselves from predators with their secretions and hard coverings, they do have enemies. They may be eaten by insects, mammals, amphibians or reptiles. Coatimundis will roll them around in the dust before eating to remove the stench. Certain monkeys and lemurs in other regions have been known to irritate a millipede to get it to secrete its fluid, and then rub it in their fur to repel mosquitoes. But most young creatures will take one bite and spit the millipede out, usually without causing much damage. A few more tries and they learn to recognize and avoid them.

Scientists say millipedes have been around for over 450 million years. In fact, they were some of the first creatures to leave the sea and come out onto dry land, if you are a devotee of evolution. The ancient species were much larger, up to eight feet in length and with a proportionate width. Fossilized trackways have been found exposed in New Mexico and Britain.



The mating ritual of millipedes is very simple. They usually face each other and perform a wrestling match with the male stroking the female with its legs, tickling her fancy I suppose. The male eventually deposits his sperm in a packet onto the ground and the female picks it up into her reproductive opening. The female will lay as many as 30 eggs in the soil and cover them for protection. After a few days tiny millipedes hatch out, but emerge in an abbreviated size consisting of only a few body segments. They grow larger by shedding their skins and add extra

segments until they reach adulthood and the full 160 segments, 21 to 25 weeks later. Some millipede mothers take care of their babies until they are grown, but our species abandons its babies from the beginning.

Although millipedes, or thousand-leggers, as most local people call them, are harmless denizens of our desert environment, some species, such as the garden millipede, can attack young seedlings in hot houses and cause economic destruction of garden crops. But our guys are not venomous, don't bite and don't cause vegetable mayhem. They are just colorful little creatures that go about, minding their own business, and making our home another interesting place to live.

And, what's in your backyard?