

GIANT CENTIPEDE

By WWF New Zealand

Reviewed and re-typed by Russell Havik

Made available online at http://come.to/dimdim_8

This publication is copyrighted by Heinemann Education. Auckland.

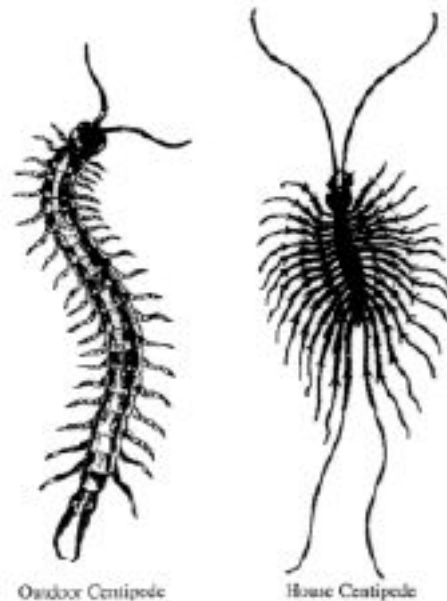
THE SPECIES

Imagine having lots of pairs of legs down each side of your body and trying to walk! It would be very difficult indeed for us, but it isn't for centipedes.

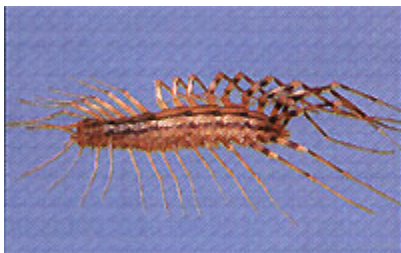
The name centipede means "one hundred legs". They actually do not have that many pair of legs, but they do have an odd number of pair of legs, such as 15, 21, 23, 31 or more.

Remember, centipedes are not insects – note: insects only have six legs. Centipedes belong to their own family; a very old group of animals has been evolving for more than 300 million years.

There are many different families of centipedes found all over the world, but there are only a few families in New Zealand. The centipede species found in this country are unique because they have been in isolation, cut off from other centipedes found in the rest of the world.



HOUSE CENTIPEDE



Other centipedes, such as the house centipede, are usually found in and around houses in the damper areas of the more northern parts of New Zealand.

There is a smaller relative of the giant Centipede which is 4-5 cm long. It lives in the southern parts of the North Island, and in Marlborough and North

Canterbury in the South Island (hot dang! It's Christchurch! And I'm there...man, better clean things up eh?).

The house centipede is up to 1 1/2 inches long and has 15 pairs of very long, almost thread-like, slender legs. Each leg is encircled by dark and white bands. The body is brown to greyish-yellow and has three dark stripes on top.

Though house centipedes are found both indoors and outdoors it is the occasional one on the bathroom or bedroom wall, or the one accidentally trapped in the bathtub, sink, or lavatory that causes the most concern. However, these locations are not where they normally originate. Centipedes prefer to live in damp portions

of basements, closets, bathrooms, unexcavated areas under the house and beneath the bark of firewood stored indoors. They do not come up through the drain pipes.

House centipedes feed on small insects, insect larvae, and on spiders. Thus they are beneficial, though most homeowners take a different point-of-view and consider them a nuisance. Technically, the house centipede could bite, but it is considered harmless to people.

House centipede control consists of drying up and cleaning, as much as possible, the areas that serve as habitat and food source for centipedes. Residual insecticides can be applied to usual hiding places such as crawl spaces, dark corners in basements, baseboard cracks and crevices, openings in concrete slabs, under shelves, around stored boxes, and so forth. Residual insecticides available to homeowners include aerosols or hand pump products such as the "ant and roach killers" and "home pest control sprays" and dusts such as boric acid. Centipedes discovered outdoors should not be controlled.¹

APPEARANCE

The thread centipede is very thin and long, just like a piece of thread, and it lives in the soil.

Other centipedes live in the forests of the Southern Alps and Stewart Island; and in Wellington and on Banks Peninsula. In fact, centipedes of some kind can be seen in every part of New Zealand.

Centipedes have a long, narrow, flattened body divided into a large number of segments or shields. This outer covering protects the soft parts inside and is called exoskeleton.

Exoskeletons do not grow as the centipede grows. Instead, the animal moults out of and outgrown exoskeleton which is replaced by a new one. The shedding is done in cells deep in the soil.

A centipede's exoskeleton is not as hard as that of an insect because it does not have as much calcium in it. Human bones and teeth, for example, would be much softer if they did not have enough calcium in them.

Like insects, centipedes have a cuticle, meaning – kinda a wax-like outer covering to help keep in the moisture. But a centipede's exoskeleton still needs to be kept moist so it has to live in damp places. They will make their home under rocks, leaves or rotting logs, in which soil and roots of trees in gardens and forests, or even the seashore.

Centipedes are sensitive to light and heat. They are nocturnal, coming out at night when it is cooler to hunt for food.

When they are out in the open, centipedes will keep moving. It is only when they go underground or under a rock, and their body is in contact with a surface on two sides, that they will come to rest.

¹ Iowa State Entomology
< <http://www.ent.iastate.edu/> >

CENTIPEDE ≠ MILLIPEDE

How do you tell a centipede from a millipede? It is really quite easy – a centipede has one pair of legs to each segment and a millipede has two pairs of legs to each segment.

Ehem...But people, really, who would check them when you see either a centipede or millipede, eh? I mean, come on, first thing I did was, jump up and hysterically screaming like hell :-p hehe...same thing with my girlfriend, even worst...she started to run away like hell.

To make life easier, here are two pictures that will show their differences.



Centipede



Millipede

Further more, a centipede's head is also slightly different colour from the rest of the body, usually more colour from the red of the body. The head has projecting pincers, antennae which are often blue in colour, and small eyes.

It is the pincers which give centipedes a fearful looking appearance. The pincers are not really a part of the mouth: centipedes have special mouth parts called mandibles, similar to those of insects.

LEGS

The segmented legs are at each side of the body segments and they wiggle snake-like as the animal moves along. Centipedes can move very fast, which is not surprising with so many legs.

When a centipede loses a leg or one of its antennae, it is not the problem that it is for many animals. It will just grow a new one where the stump was, after the next moult. Walking without one leg is not as difficult as they have so many legs there is always another one to assist.

Having lots of jointed segments, muscles and legs enables centipedes to twist, turn and loop their bodies with ease.

Giant centipedes sometimes make a rattling sound as they move because the plates of the exoskeleton touch each other.

OTHER FEATURES

The pincers, called poison claws, are actually the first pair of legs which have fewer segments than the other legs. They have become thicker and curved forward to be more in the front and below the head, rather like crab's.

Centipedes have eyes, so they can tell if it is night or day. They breathe through special holes called spiracles on each side of the head and on the sides of the first three front segments.

However, the real eyes and nose are the two long feelers on the front of their head. They are also made up of segments and are very sensitive to the surroundings. The animal will lift its head up and move its antennae from side to side, sensing prey.

GROOMING

If you watch a centipede, you will notice that it spends a lot of time cleaning itself with a great deal of care, especially the antennae. The pincers grasp the antennae at its base down near the head, and it looks as if the animal is slowly nibbling its way down to the end.

Centipedes do this to both antennae very carefully until they are clean and they will wash them again after eating. They then clean the rest of their body and legs. Each leg in turn is held by the poison claw and cleaned in the mouth from the base to the tip.

A centipede's last pair of back legs are also different, they do not help with moving as they have become much thicker and longer, and they also have large hooks and spines.

FOOD

Centipedes are carnivorous and do bite. They are nocturnal and very good hunters, catching and killing both the larvae and adult forms of many insects and spiders. They will climb up trees in search of prey.

Giant centipedes can eat worms and even lizards. Geckos are one of their favourite foods, and they can devour one in single night. Centipedes attack from the rear, capturing and holding their prey in their back pincers. Then they curl their body around the prey, and with the front pincers bite the victim to poison and kill it.

They usually carry their prey back to the safety of the leaf litter, log or rock. They will eat all the insides, leaving the hard outer casing and wings. Other centipedes are also at risk as they attack each other, even the young.

BREEDING AND THE YOUNG

The female giant centipede and some of the other species lay 15-35 small, white to yellow eggs. They lay them in a specially built hollow in wood or soil usually in the early summer months.

The mother will remain in the brooding chamber, coiled around the eggs to protect them. She won't even leave them to feed herself, the female will often clean the eggs with her mouth, to eliminate any chance of disease, until they hatch. She continues to care for her young, protecting them against predators until they get big enough to look after themselves.

The female centipede is a very good mother and during this time she can sometimes be seen with her offspring climbing all over her. If the female is disturbed while she is nesting, she will eat all her eggs. If she becomes separated from them, they soon become covered with mould and fungi and will not hatch.

Young centipedes are just like the adults with all their legs and segments. However, they go through a number of growing stages to become adults. This is when they shed their outer exoskeletons in special holes or cells deeps in the soil where it is safer.

DEFENSE AND PREDATORS

Defenseless young centipedes are preyed upon by a species of native ant which often takes them to feed its own young. These ants are very small (about the size of a sandfly) and golden-yellow to brown in colour, but very strong.

Giant centipedes live to be five years old. They were once found all over the North Island, but rats have caused their decline. Giant centipedes are now endangered, and most of them are found on rat-free islands.

Here is an idea: Get rid of house centipedes by owning rats, for free all over the house :-p

Other centipede species in both the North and South Islands may have also declines with the loss of forest and other habitats.