CREATURE FEATURE

millipede or centipede

by Cyril Brass

How to tell a millipede from a centipede? One way is to count the legs.

Despite its name, the millipede or "thousand-legger" does not have a thousand legs, but only between eighty and four hundred legs depending on the specific species. Also known as Diplopods, meaning doubled feet, each body segment of the millipede has two pairs of legs, except the first three segments. This gives the appearance of a thousand legs. The millipede is a slow creature incapable of crawling fast; there are just too many legs to coordinate for quick movements. When they do move about the leaf litter and dirt, it appears the legs glide in wave-like, worm-like motion.

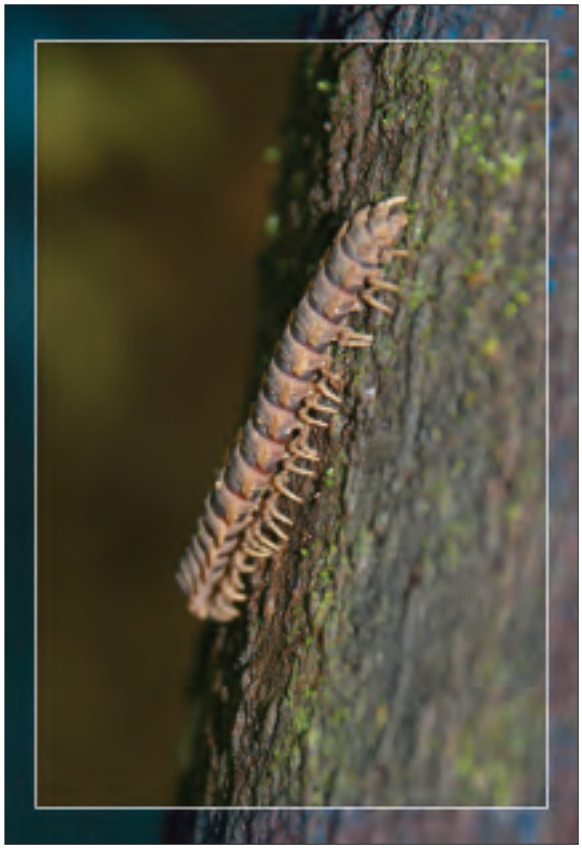
The centipede or "hundred-legger" has fewer and longer legs enabling it to run more rapidly escaping from any danger more easily than the millipede. There is only one pair of legs on each body segment of the centipede.

Besides the number of legs, there are several other distinguishing characteristics between the millipede and centipede.

Most millipede species possess a cylindrical elongated body composed of many narrow segments. The rounded head with short antennae blends into the body making it more worm-like than the centipede. The centipede has a flattened segmented body with a distinct head with a pair of long antennae. The millipede is born with only four or five body segments. As it grows, it molts, shedding its old exoskeleton, generating more segments and legs,

The millipede, unlike the centipede, cannot bite, pinch or sting. And because it cannot quickly escape, it has developed other protective mechanisms. Its primary defense is to release poisonous liquid secretions which can burn if it gets into eyes, or may produce allergic reactions. But this does not pose any serious health hazard to humans.

Several millipede species are able to spray this foul smelling chemical towards their attackers. Through microscopic pores along the sides of the body, these invertebrates are able to squirt hydrogen cyanide.



Another way the millipede protects itself from danger is to curl up in a tight spiral coil or roll into a ball, hiding its delicate legs and soft underbelly within the armored exterior shell.

The centipede on the other hand does not need a protective position. This nocturnal creature can inflict a nasty bite with its venomous claws which are located close to its head. Plus, each leg has a sharp claw which can produce a tiny scratch or cut on the skin. Poison is released onto the inflicted area resulting in an inflamed wound.

The centipede is a carnivorous predator preying on insects. With its poison pincers, it grasps and kills prey by injecting venom.

The millipede is a scavenger, herbivore and detrivore consuming plants and organic waste as its source of nutrition. Various millipede species can by found worldwide living in moist microhabitats which are dark and damp.

Tropical rainforests are an ideal habitat for the millipede, with abundant decomposing plant material; rotting leaves and decaying wood. The millipede provides an important role in the tropical rainforests by helping break down dead and decaying plant matter, returning essential nutrients back into the ecosystem.

On several hikes in the rainforests of Costa Rica, I have avoided stepping on the Rainforest Millipede crossing the walking trails and I have spotted them climbing on fallen trees. Knowing about their defense position, I gently touched one of the millipedes with a stick. Sure enough, it coiled itself into a ball. I kept my distance, careful not to get squirted with the toxic chemicals.

The millipede… a many-legged creature… a non threatening arthropod… a helpful invertebrate. ca

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