

Notes on the Giant New Zealand Centipede, Cormocephalus rubriceps

B.G. Bennett  
Entomology Division, DSIR  
Private Bag, Auckland

A large specimen of Cormocephalus rubriceps (Newport) was captured at Murray's Bay, Auckland on 14 December 1979. When received it was very upset and aggressive. I kept it in an eight-inch-high plastic container with leaves and bark on the bottom. The leaves were sprayed with water occasionally as the centipede seemed to require a good deal of moisture, and it was frequently seen drinking from puddles in the container.

It fed on spiders, centipedes, moths, earwigs, and wetas, but showed little interest in opiliones, amphipods, or isopods.

I mostly fed and observed it during the day. However, when seen at night, especially when disturbed by light, it was far more active. When fed a puriri moth, Aenetus virescens, about 2 pm, the centipede immediately attacked, mounting the moth's back and holding it with its leg and weight as it bit into the abdomen. The centipede began eating, then, when the moth was still, it dragged the corpse under the leaves. At one stage it stopped feeding and walked around the cage, then returned to feed again. The next morning only the wings and shell of the thorax of the moth remained, and the centipede was very docile and gave little reaction even when prodded.

On another occasion it was given a house centipede Scutigera coleoptrata (Linn.). The C. rubriceps spent a great deal of time chasing it but failed to catch it. A large male spider, Dysdera crocata, put in the cage immediately caught the centipede's attention and was quickly caught and then abandoned after only a few seconds, possibly because it was bad tasting. The spider died within half an hour.

Adults and nymphs of Hemideina thoracica, the Auckland weta, were quickly caught, gripped by the centipede's legs, and held upside down while the centipede curled its head around to bite either the thorax or abdomen. The body contents of the wetas were completely drained leaving only the skin, and sometimes only the hind legs and empty head capsule. On one occasion a large female weta fought back and managed to inflict a severe bite upon the centipede; a copious amount of clear fluid appeared on the centipede and it immediately withdrew and hid. The weta died shortly afterwards. The centipede must have been mortally wounded as a week later it was found dead with a wound scar on its ventral side.

There have been two records of C. rubriceps biting humans. One record was in Auckland in April 1958; the centipede bit the person on the wrist, and the reaction was severe pain, retching, and inflammation.

The second record occurred on the Three Kings Islands during 1972 DSIR Entomology Division Expedition. Mr Jack McBurney was bitten on the hand, through several layers of plastic, while collecting at night. The bite was momentarily painful and swelled considerably, but had subsided by the next morning.

There is a very considerable population of these centipedes on Great Island, Three Kings, and some members of the expedition camped beside a pile of boulders which the centipedes favoured (G.W. Ramsay pers. comm.). At night each member of this tent surrounded his sleeping bag with two circles of metal foil so that he could be alerted by the sound of the centipedes crossing it. On five occasions centipedes were detected and removed. The size of these centipedes seems greatest in populations on some offshore islands such as the Three Kings. A similar phenomenon occurs with some other arthropods and plants.

Archey (1936) states that this species is quite common in Auckland gardens. Apart from the Murray's Bay and Three Kings specimens mentioned above, we have records of species from Huia, Piha, Bethels, Remuera, Titirangi, Dargaville, Little Barrier Island, David Rocks (The Noises), Ruamahuanui Island (Aldermen Islands), Hunua Gorge (the Hunuas), Point Chevalier, Whangarei.

Reference

Archey, G. 1936. A revision of the Chilopoda of New Zealand. Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum 2(1): 43-70.

Kingfisher Prey

At Titirangi, Auckland, on Sunday July 20th, I watched a kingfisher perched on a feeding tray near our kitchen window. It was keeping a watch on our Acmena hedge and was obviously on the look-out for food. On four occasions during the next fifteen minutes it flew into the hedge and emerged carrying a dull green preying mantis with outspread wings in its beak which was promptly swallowed. It is likely that the bird was hungry following a spell of cold wet weather, and that the mantids were sheltering in the hedge before they finally succumbed to old age and the winter weather.

W. Kemp