

## Colorado Chilopod of Interest

# Common Desert Centipede (Tiger Centipede)



**Figure 1.** The common desert centipede, *Scolopendra polymorpha*.

**Scientific Name:** *Scolopendra polymorpha* Wood

**Class:** Chilopoda

**Order:** Scolopendromorpha

**Family:** Scolopendridae

**Description and Distinctive Features:** The common desert centipede (Figure 1) is, by far, the largest centipede commonly encountered in the state, often reaching about 5 inches in length. Coloration is typically light brown to brick but may range even more widely; olive brown, yellow and bluish tints are known to occur among this highly variably colored species. There is usually one dark stripe running across each segment, lending to this species another common name - “tiger centipede”.

**Distribution:** The giant desert centipede native to the plains areas of eastern Colorado and occurs at lower elevation areas of the West Slope. Within the state it is most commonly found in the southeastern counties of the Arkansas Valley.



**Figure 2.** Immature common desert centipede found under cow pie.

**Life History and Habits:** The common desert centipede is a nocturnal predator, feeding on any arthropods that it can capture. Prey is captured by use of a pair of specialized front legs (maxillipeds) equipped with a poison gland to kill and stun prey. Larger, older stages may even occasionally capture and kill small reptiles or mammals. As they are sensitive to prolonged drying, the common desert centipede stays hidden in under rocks or in other protected sites during the day (Figure 2).

Eggs of the desert centipede are laid in a cavities hollowed out under a rock, in decayed

wood or other sheltered sites. After egg-laying, the female winds around the eggs until the young have hatched, and she continues to guard them until they have molted repeatedly and dispersed. The common desert centipede is long-lived, living for 4 years or more.

The hind end forms a "pseudohead" that is very similar in appearance to the true head; a long pair of legs extending somewhat resemble the antennae of the head (Figure 3). It is thought that this pseudohead helps protect it from attacks by larger reptiles, mammals and birds that prey upon it. The hind pair of legs, which are longer than the other legs, do not aid in motion and are sensory only.



**Figure 3.** The common desert centipede with pseudohead labeled. *Photo Courtesy of Frank Peairs.*

The common desert centipede is secretive in habit but will bite in defense if handled. The bite is quite painful, although not life threatening.

**Related Species:** *Scolopendra heros* (Girard) has been collected on rare occasion in some southeastern Colorado counties. It may exceed the common desert centipede in size, reaching over 6 inches. It is marked with a reddish head, generally dark body, and lighter colored legs.