



"Thousand-Leggers"

THE older zoology books used to call them "millipeds," and class them with the centipedes (or "hundred-footers") into a group they called "myriapoda"; but it all came to the same thing: "milliped" is merely Latin, and "myriapod" Greek, for "thousand feet." But whether in Latin or Greek or English, a name that credits these wiggling soil-dwellers with a thousand feet apiece is an undeserved exaggeration. They may seem to have a thousand feet when they unexpectedly crawl across the back of your hand, or ten thousand when you try to catch one before he gets back into his sheltering crack in the earth, but a mere three hundred is closer to the actual number. Each average thousand-legger is made up of a head and about seventy-five segments or joints, each of which has four legs.

Like almost every unusual crawling thing, the poor thousand-legger is commonly believed to be poisonous; whereas he really is quite harmless. Even his relative, the house centipede, is not poisonous, or at any rate is unable to bite through the relatively tough human skin. Only the large tropical centipedes are seriously venomous. The centipedes, both large and small, are carnivorous, and prey on insects, but the harmless "thousand-legger" is a vegetarian.

But this badge of inoffensiveness is also the sign of his disgrace. For many of the millipeds do considerable damage to the roots of plants, earning the ill title of false wireworms, by analogy with the true wireworms, which are the larval stages of beetles. In general, a "thousand-legger" in your garden is not to be regarded as a friend.

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ZOOLOGY

Stop-Watch Proves Snakes Never Travel at High Speed

SNAKES do not travel at high speed, popular opinion to the contrary notwithstanding. So says Dr. Walter Mosauer, zoologist at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Under repeated tests the famed blue racer snake never exceeded a maximum speed of two and one-half miles per hour. Reports of racing speed are usually the result of mental delusion promoted by fright, both of the observer and the snake, and by the winding motion of the creature.

The method by which a snake propels himself is revealed in a critical investigation described here by Dr. Mosauer. An ingeniously planned research, in which the X-ray camera, scalpel and stop-watch were featured, included everything from African vipers to boa constrictors. From the report it is evident that the serpent's inside power plant is much more complicated than his externals.

Devoid of legs, fins or other reasonable propeller mechanism, the snake makes up for these shortages with an elaborate muscular layout. In general his backbone is connected with his ribs by a host of strap muscles, each tied to at least one vertebra and one rib.

Sometimes a rib is connected to a joint sixteen ribs away, sometimes to one near by. These connections permit any kind of wiggle or bend in any direction.

The well-known but mystifying locomotion of the "side-winder" rattlesnake was studied by Dr. Mosauer. The venomous creature apparently prefers to slide sidewise in two parallel tracks over the desert sand. In this performance he corresponds to a two-loop spiral, modified slightly by muscular displacement. Naturally the two loops make parallel tracks. At regular intervals the spiral leaves one track, and a new track is started one space in advance.

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PHYSIOLOGY

Thyroid Gland Activated By Pituitary Gland

THE SMALL GLAND at the base of the brain known as the pituitary gland produces a hormone which acts as a thyroid "starter" or activator, it appears from the report of Dr. Frank H. Figge and Dr. Eduard Uhlenhuth of the University of Maryland Medical School to the American Association of Anatomists meeting in New York.

These investigators found that although the thyroid gland is responsible for the change from the larval to the grown-up stage in the axolotl, an animal related to the salamander, the thyroid cannot bring about this change by itself.

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