

Creature Feature: Fall 2015

By W. Scott Douglas

Scary Houseguests

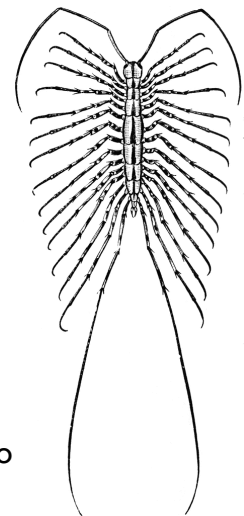
This newsletter should arrive sometime in late October, so in honor of Halloween, I've opted to discuss some of the scarier fauna you may have lodging in your home; the camel cricket, the house centipede and the brown recluse spider. Only one of these, the camel cricket is actually endemic to Pennsylvania. Both the house centipede and the brown recluse are not only imported, but actually cannot survive the Pennsylvania winter outside of your warm and cozy abode.



The least scary of these invaders is the camel cricket. There are many representatives of the family Rhaphidophoridae in Pennsylvania, living in many different habitats. Regardless of the species, the camel, camelback, or spider cricket is often mistaken for something other than the harmless creature that it is because it is large, brown, has many legs and will often jump toward a threat, rather than away. They live in or under dark moist things, eating fungi, fabric and other detritus, even cardboard. I usually see them in my wood

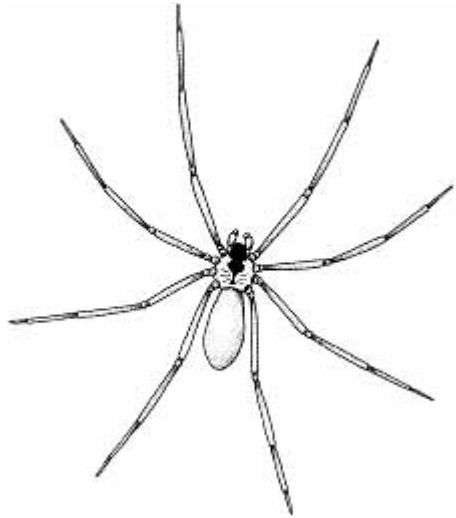
piles, but since many basements in our area are either stone or wet, or both, most houses have some. Their legs are longer than most crickets (all the better to jump), and their antennae are actually longer than the rest of their bodies (all the better to smell), so when they jump at you in the dark confines of the basement, laundry room or wellhouse, it can seem like you are being attacked by a large jumping spider. This can elicit a gasp, or a scream, from even an experienced nature-lover. These crickets do not chirp, so you might not even know you have them, until you surprise them in their dark, moist hidey-holes.

Our second invader is the house centipede, *Scutigera coleoptrata*. These guys run like the wind on their 15 pairs of long legs, and they have antennae longer than their bodies too, making their 1 to 1.25 inch bodies seem like 3-4 inches. The first time I saw one of these in my apartment, I was certainly startled and concerned when I could not figure out where it went after its lightning fast trip across my living room. I did my research and found out that while they are not the most attractive house guest, they are actually really good at keeping other pests, including cockroaches, crickets and spiders at bay. These guys like moist damp places too, and typically



hang out in the basement, or under the sink until nighttime when they go out hunting. I was told by a friend that they can deliver a nasty bite, but I found out that this is not actually true. While they are venomous, the venom is not delivered by the mandibles, it is delivered by modified legs, and the stingers cannot penetrate human skin very well. If they do sting you, it is no worse than a bee sting, and there are no long lasting effects. House centipedes are originally from the Mediterranean, and cannot survive the winter outside in PA, but will stay and reproduce in your house as long as there is a good food source (other invertebrates).

The last unwelcome invader is the brown recluse spider, *Loxosceles reclusa*. This is probably one of the most misunderstood spiders in a not so well understood group. The brown recluse is a small non-descript brown arachnid, a little bigger than a quarter with legs



splayed. It has only six eyes, rather than the usual eight and is covered with fine brown hairs. If you get close enough, you can sometimes see a violin shaped marking on its cephalothorax. It is not aggressive, and likes to hide in dry, dark places, particularly cardboard boxes.

In fact, this spider's predilection for cardboard boxes is how it gets transported to Pennsylvania from its native haunts in the southern Midwest. The recluse, as you might expect from its name, is rarely seen unless disturbed, and hunts only at night. Like the house centipede, it hunts for other household invertebrates like crickets, cockroaches and other spiders. Despite its reputation, its fangs are very tiny, and most people are bitten when they squeeze the animal close to their skin by either putting on clothes or shoes in which the animal

has hidden or by rolling over on them in their sleep. Recluse venom is hemotoxic, and can cause skin lesions or more serious necrotic sores in sensitive individuals. In some rare cases, more systemic reactions can occur, up to and including death. Like the centipede, the brown recluse cannot survive our winters outside.

How do you rid your home of these unwanted house guests? The best solution is prevention, cleaning up clutter inside and close to the house, and by closing up holes in foundations and crawlspaces. However, once these creatures invade, they can be very hard to eradicate. Sticky traps are a good non-chemical solution, but more than likely this will only tell you where they are hunting, and will not do much to limit their population. Best to learn about them, and realize that they are not "out to get you". Many people never even know they share their home with these scary creatures.