

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi

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Scutigera-The Leggy Centipede

My torch shone on a weird looking animal. The caterpillar-like creature had long, raised legs, which were symmetrically arranged all around its body, making it look like an alien from outer space. I was looking at a centipede belonging to the family Scutigera. Centipedes (“*centi*”=hundred” and “*pedis*”=foot) are arthropods which have many legs. The inch and a half long Scutigera centipede, though, has only 15 pairs of long legs attached to its body, not a hundred as its name suggests. But as I found out, the 15 pairs of legs were sufficient for the leggy “*pede*” (my nickname for centipedes!) to do quite well for itself.

The Scutigera is often found under rocks, amidst mud and other debris on



hill slopes. Remaining stock-still, its shape and colour camouflages it perfectly in its surroundings. The only moving part of the motionless centipede is its antennae, which it uses to touch and smell. The antennae are deceptively like its legs, thereby making it difficult to figure out which is the

front or the back of the centipede. I had to peer long and hard at the *Scutigera*, to find out where its head was.

The centipede is a nocturnal, predatory animal, and its prey includes spiders, ants, bugs-basically any small arthropod that it can catch. Should appropriate prey comes its way, the centipede will move with amazing dexterity, catching its prey in its mandibles, immobilizing it by injecting venom, and gobbling its poor catch. Though the *Scutigera* can bite, its venom is not toxic enough to harm humans. A bite from a centipede will only itch for a short while.

If a wicked predator, or an overly interested human such as me were to peer closely at the “*pede*”, it scurries away hurriedly on long, bent legs, all perfectly synchronized. Its speed belies its size, and reveals how many legs are clearly better than just two! Having fifteen pairs of legs is clearly very useful for the “*pede*”. Along with its mouth, the *Scutigera* also uses its legs to catch prey, and hence can catch more than one insect at the same time. It has been observed beating insects to death using its long legs. Also, if caught by a predator, it can also detach one or more of its legs, and still get away relatively unharmed. However, I can imagine the disadvantage of having so many legs. Imagine having to wear 15 pairs of shoes, or having to clip toe-nails on 30 feet! I think I am happy with just the two legs I have!

As I watched the leggy creature, it waved its antennae at me menacingly. I touched its antennae and the *Scutigera* coiled back. Obviously I did not smell too good (ah-the Axe effect-I was not wearing any deodorant!), because the “*pede*” scurried away, clearly deciding that I was not the tasty morsel it had been seeking.

The *Scutigera* is normally found in Dehradun in scrub and in forested areas, but can also be found in urban surroundings. Sometimes, it enters homes where it can do a good job of controlling cockroaches, which it relishes. There you go-another natural solution for your cockroach problem at home-just let loose a few *Scutigera* and watch your “roach” problem go away!

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Making a difference: Use organic methods for pest control in your home.
Make pellets mixing *atta*, milk and boric powder and distribute them in your kitchen to kill those nasty cockroaches.

Photograph caption: The leggy “pede”