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The House Centipede (*Scutigera coleoptrata*; Chilopoda): Controversy and Contradiction

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I objurgate the centipede,
A bug we do not really need.
At sleepy-time he beats a path
Straight to the bedroom or the bath.
You always wallop where he's not,
Or if he is he makes a spot.

—Ogden Nash[1]

ABSTRACT

The common house centipede, *Scutigera coleoptrata*, has a long and storied history in the annals of zoology. The species has been through five scientific name changes since it was first described by Linnaeus in 1758. Its widespread distribution throughout the Northern Hemisphere has resulted in substantial debate as to its place of origin. Among the centipedes, its morphology is unique and highly specialized, including compound eyes, elongated legs for sprinting, and posterior legs that function as rear antennae. It is a formidable and efficient predator, which sets it apart from others in the Chilopoda. The highly adaptable *S. coleoptrata* thrives in human habitation, and as such, is referred to as the house centipede despite the fact that its natural habitat is in moist crevices and detritus on forest floors. House centipedes may well reign as the ultimate house cleaners, preying on a multitude of invasive invertebrates. Nevertheless, it is still considered a pest to humans and has become a prime target of the pest control industry. This review summarizes some interesting aspects of the biology and ecology of *S. coleoptrata*, with focus on records from North America.

INTRODUCTION

Ogden Nash's irreverent ode to the lowly centipede seemed unjustly aimed at the house centipede, *Scutigera coleoptrata* (Frontispiece). The house centipede is a common member of the fauna of many households throughout the United States and Canada, and it is one of three species of centipedes found in Kentucky. Its natural habitat in the Ohio region is under moist rock ledges, detritus, and crevices in woodlands (Lee 1980), but it readily adapts to basements, drainage fixtures, and other cool moist environments of human habitations. House centipedes may actually be beneficial to humans because they prey on many household pests, including insects, small spiders, and sow bugs. Yet, a recent search of the Internet using the keywords "centipede AND pest" yielded ca. 35,000 websites of pest management companies and extension agen-

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