

NOTES ON CAPTIVE FEEDING OF THE CENTIPEDE SNAKE (*SCOLECOPHIS ATROCINCTUS*)

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TAXONOMY

This small snake belongs to the Colubridae family. It has been known by many synonyms. The first scientific name, was given by Schlegel (1837) and this was *Calamaria atrocincta*. Fitzinger established the genus *Scolecophis* (from the Greek scolec "worm" and ophis "snake"), he called it *Scolecophis atrocincta* (1843). Hallowell proposed *Elaps zonatus* (1855) and Picado proposed *Pseudoboa petola* (1931). Actually this snake is called *Scolecophis atrocinctus* in accordance with Peters and Orejas-Miranda (1970). The genus *Scolecophis* contains this single specie.

WHERE IT IS FOUND

The Centipede snake lives in the tropical forests of Central America. It has been found in Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. Its habitat is represented by undergrowth, it is found among humus, leaf-litter and forest debris.

WHAT IS IS

The Centipede snake can be defined as a "false coral" snake. It is a small snake, it is able to reach a length of about 40-60 centimetres (15.7-23.6 inches). It is slender and brightly marked, it has black and white rings around the body and tail, with red markings along the top of every white band. It has a typical white band over its snout. It has smooth scales with a small head and very small eyes.

FOOD PREFERENCE

It is a nocturnal snake and it seems to eat primarily centipedes, from which it gets its common name "centipede snake". It is not clear if it feeds on other invertebrates too.

MYSTERIOUS BREEDING

We know very little of the centipede snake. The observations in its natural environment are very scarce and in captivity too. Above all, we think that it lays eggs but we are not sure, its breeding is still unknown.

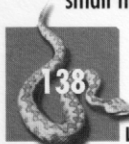
MY EXPERIENCE

I had the possibility to observe two centipede snakes at a private snake farm. Both showed themselves to be shy and did not bite. They spent the majority of time, quite hidden.

I determined sex by probe and they proved to be a pair. The male had a very brilliant colour, it was 32 centimetres long (12.6 inches). The female was darker and the black rings were wider, it was 41 centimetres long (16.1 inches).

Two centipede snakes were kept in a fauna-box of 50x30x15 centimetres (19.6x11.8x5.9 inches), with bark chippings and a water bowl. The temperature of the snake room, where the centipede snakes were maintained, was 27-32°C (80.6-89.6°F) during the day and it fell to 23-25°C (73.4-77°F) at night. The humidity was between 60-80%.

Various prey were offered to the centipede snakes. In the beginning two very small pinkies were put inside



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the *fauna-box* and they were left there for three days. They were not eaten. Then mealworms and waxworms were tried, they were also left in the cage, both were *not* eaten.

Crickets of different dimensions (small, medium, large) were given to the snakes and they were left in the cage for seven days. This time also, the centipede snakes didn't eat them.

In all these cases, the centipede snakes didn't show any interest in these prey items and they had not shown any reaction of aggressiveness to them (e.g. bite).

Several species of "centipedes" were caught (Table 1), they were found under stones and among forest humus. Some "sow bugs" were found and caught, they are also called "wood louse" (Table 2). Different species of centipedes were given to the snakes, which ate them after a few hours. They also ate the sow bugs belonging to genus *Porcellio*. They caught and ate these prey at night, they were not ever seen when they were eating.

In Table 3 the feeding data of *Scolecophis atrocinctus* are presented.

class	order	genus
Chilopoda	Graphilomorpha	<i>Himantarium</i>
	Scolopendromorpha	<i>Scolopendra</i>
	Litobiomorpha	<i>Lithobius</i>
	Scutigermorpha	<i>Scutigera</i>

Table 1. Centipedes as prey.

order	suborder	genus
Isopoda	Oniscoidea	<i>Oniscus</i> <i>Porcellio</i>

Table 2. Sow bugs as prey.

type of prey	result
pinkie	negative
cricket	negative
mealworm	negative
waxworm	negative
centipede (Chilopoda)	
<i>Himantarium</i>	positive
<i>Scolopendra</i>	positive
<i>Lithobius</i>	positive
<i>Scutigera</i>	positive
Isopoda	
<i>Oniscus</i>	negative
<i>Porcellio</i>	positive

Table 3. Captive feeding of *Scolecophis atrocinctus*.

FUTURE PLAN

The feeding of the centipede snake appears to be very specialized, it will be interesting to try with other types of prey, mainly other invertebrates such as earthworms (Lumbricidae) and maggots (Diptera).

If this pair of centipede snakes will continue to enjoy good health and to eat these "wild-caught" prey, it will be very interesting to make a careful study of many aspects of their biology, especially breeding behaviour.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was permitted to take pictures at the "Serpi & Co" snake farm, Via Ghiarino 6, Crespellano (Bologna), Italy. E-mail: zerbinia@tin.it.

I thank the staff of this snake farm, specifically Andrea Zerbini and Massimo Cevolani, for their availability and kindness.

English corrections by Mark Wootten.



Scoleophis atrocinctus, female. Emanuele Ginatti. Courtesy of Serpi & Co.

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Scolecophis atrocinctus, female. Emanuele Cinatti. Courtesy of Serpi & Co.



Scolecophis atrocinctus, male. Emanuele Cinatti. Courtesy of Serpi & Co.