

## Bitten by a blind passenger

Report of a *Scolopendra morsitans* Linnaeus, 1758  
bite in Germany (Chilopoda: Scolopendromorpha)

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**Zusammenfassung.** Gebissen von einem blinden Passagier – Bericht über einen Biss von *Scolopendra morsitans* Linnaeus, 1758 in Deutschland (Chilopoda: Scolopendromorpha). Eine Frau wurde von einem Exemplar von *Scolopendra morsitans* in den Finger gebissen, welcher sich in einem Handtuch im Badezimmer in Frankfurt am Main versteckt hatte. Das Tier stammte aus dem Koffer von Nachbarn, die zuvor den Urlaub in Sri Lanka verbracht hatten.

**Keywords.** Sri Lanka, Arthropoda, Myriapoda, alien species

A strange case happened in an apartment building in the Savignystr. in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, at 11 PM on Sunday, 28 August 2016. A ca. 30 year-old pregnant woman (28th week of pregnancy) went into her bathroom, used a hand towel and was bitten by something on her right middle finger and saw a strange animal falling down to the ground. There was a reddish itching spot on the finger and it was swollen. Her husband caught the creature (ca. 7 cm long) alive and the couple immediately went to the emergency room at a nearby hospital. The physician only disinfected the wound, due to lack of knowledge of the animal and its toxin and because of the pregnancy of the woman.

The captured specimen was brought to the Entomology section I of the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt and then sent to the author by Curator Damir Kovac. The specimen was anaesthetized with carbon dioxide and identified as the non-native chilopod species *Scolopendra morsitans* Linnaeus, 1758 (Fig. 1), a widespread scolopendrid species in the tropics, especially in tropical Africa and Asia, reaching a length up to 12.7 cm (SIRIWUT et al. 2016). The toxin of this species has been recently summarised (UNDHEIM et al. 2015). According to unpublished reports on the internet, bites are often not very painful and have a maximum intensity and reaction similar to a bee sting. The *S. morsitans* specimen was kept in a plastic box and died in the summer of 2017 for unknown reasons. The preserved specimen (in 96 % ethanol) is now in the collection of the Senckenberg Museum of Natural History Görlitz (SMNG VNR17963).

How did this non-native animal come into the bathroom of the woman? The first guess was an escaped specimen kept as pet, as *S. morsitans* is common in the German pet trade of exotic arthropods. The couple asked in the neighbourhood if anybody lost a pet centipede, but without success. A few days later, upstairs neighbours in the apartment building disclosed the secret. They had spent their holiday on the west coast of Sri Lanka in the Kalpitiya region. One week before they flew out from Bandaranaike International Airport, they had left their suitcases in a car rental station to attend a guided tour. After arriving in Germany they discovered the blind passenger when opening the suitcase. They closed the suitcase immediately and put it on their balcony on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of their building. On the following Monday they took the suitcase to the Frankfurt Zoological Garden where it was opened, but the strange animal was not inside.

The blind passenger *S. morsitans* had escaped from the suitcase, probably walked on the wall down diagonally to the balcony of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, entered the apartment of the unsuspecting couple who lived there and found a nice dark and slightly moist shelter in the hand towel in the bathroom, where it was later disturbed by a human hand.

This is the second report of a bite in Germany of a scolopendrid which was not kept as a pet. A *Scolopendra cingulata* Latreille, 1829, had hidden in a shoe and bit a man in the foot in Issum, North-Rhine Westphalia (DECKER et al. 2015).



**Figure 1:** The alive blind passenger *Scolopendra morsitans*. Photograph: Ingo Turre.

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