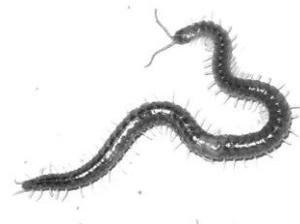


NATURE NOTES: 84

I must have said many a time how Nature always has some surprises lined up for us, but I could never have anticipated what was awaiting my attention when I drew back the curtain of my patio window on the morning of August 11th. Something caught my eye and looking more closely I saw that it was an earwig – but at rather an odd angle, lodged obliquely against the outside of the glass. I thought at first that it was caught in a cobweb, but then realised it was attached to what looked like part of a long hairy leg, of which over an inch was visible. If this was a spider, I tried to imagine the size it must be, with seven more legs like that. I opened the patio door and went outside, wondering quite what I was going to find.

What met my gaze was no giant spider but something far more bizarre. For the “hairy leg” was in fact the front half of a many-legged centipede (the long, thin yellowish kind, not the fatter shiny brown one we see more commonly). It had anchored itself to the window frame by its rear half, and had the earwig, freshly dead or perhaps paralysed, in its ferocious looking jaws, with the fore-end of its body wrapped once around the prey, for all the world like a miniature snake. I managed to get a couple of photos, shortly after which the centipede dropped its breakfast – presumably having devoured the body contents of the unfortunate insect – and crawled away. I’ve noticed these centipedes before (my adviser on these things tells me its name is *Geophilus carpophagus*), but had always assumed they fed on tiny thrips or aphids or other minute soil inhabitants, not something the size of an earwig. I found myself thinking how fortunate we are in many ways to be as big as we are!



*

A few days later, catching one of those fleeting fine and sunny days which have been at such a premium this month, I was working my way along the top of the Axmouth-Lyme Regis landslip, revelling not only in the expansive views of Pinhay Bay below and out across Lyme Bay to the Golden Cap and Portland, but also in the extraordinary jumble of habitats within the undercliff itself, exquisitely captured by artist Elaine Franks in her beautiful book, published in 1989, of annotated paintings and sketches, brought to my attention by my neighbour Margaret Durston. Vying with one another for my attention on this occasion were a sheltered sunlit chalky bank, smothered in flowers and dancing with butterflies, and a magnificent veteran oak tree on the very edge of the wooded wilderness nearby. With its long-stalked leaves it looked like a sessile oak, but this would be unusual on chalk, so I took a spray of foliage home to double check. The books refer to the “stellate hairs” to be found on the underside of the leaves of this species, so I thought it was time I got the Meiji out and took a proper look – at 30x magnification, in 3-D. And there they were! Tiny silvery star-shaped hairs among the leaf veins. Much smaller than I’d realised which was perhaps why I’d overlooked them before. Now I can’t wait to check on the many individuals of this oak, of which we have an abundance here in the Quantocks, where it favours the more acid soils of the higher hill land.



*

Harking back to the landslip, I couldn’t help but recollect a memorable event over 30 years ago when I was gathering information about the history and ecology of this unique place for my own book. On holiday at Lyme with the family, I’d left my wife and daughters doing sandcastles by the Cobb, and set out along the coastal path with our Scottie, Angus, for company. But it’s a long and, not surprisingly, very demanding path to negotiate, and it was a hot and sultry day – the more so in that semi-tropical microclimate – so we’d barely got half way when we decided to abort the mission, and scrambled our way via a rough side-track up the cliff, with the intention of regaining the coast road for an easier return route. Pushing through the bushes at the top, we found ourselves, now a scruffy and bedraggled pair, in the grounds of the prestigious Allhallows School in the midst of their annual glitzy prize-giving ceremony – marquees, speeches, trophies, cream teas – the lot. But far from being ordered off the premises, we were treated with much courtesy and concern, and plied with food and refreshments before being sent on our way. Alas the school has long gone.

Chris S.