

Scorpions' bad rap dates to prehistoric times

Editor's note: The following article is part of an ongoing science series written by Arkansas State University staff members and published periodically by The Sun.

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

JONESBORO—A recent discovery of fossil sea scorpions in Scotland has revived interest on the natural history of these animals. The discovery was of the tracks left by a gigantic sea scorpion that lived about 330 million years ago.

Dr. Martin Whyte of the Department of Geography of the University of Sheffield reported in the last issue of the prestigious scientific journal *Nature* that he had found the largest ever tracks of an arthropod.

The tracks belong to a species of a 6-legged eurypterid or water scorpion called *Hibbertopterus*. This animal was 1.6 meters long (about 5 feet, 3 inches).

Although aquatic, these tracks now show that these animals were not only extraordinarily large but were also amphibious, that is, capable of moving on land as well as in water.

These animals were predators and terrific ones. They were top predators going after anything that moved, using their large pincers, or chelicers, to trap their preys.

They were so voracious that when portrayed in the original

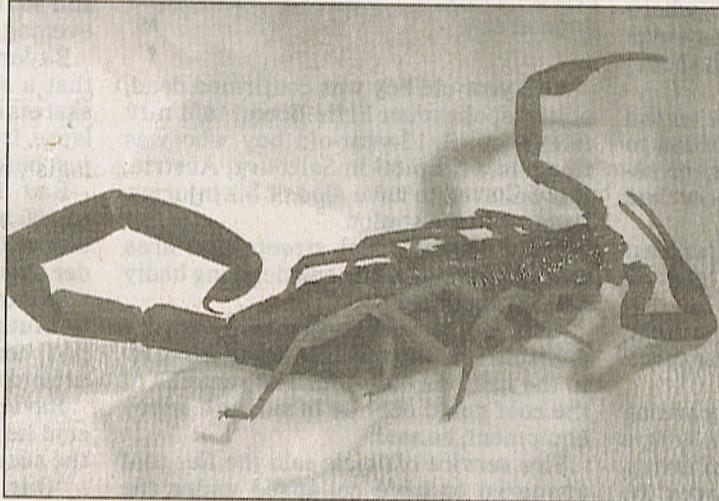


Photo by Tanja McKay

The striped bark scorpion, the only scorpion species in Arkansas.

movie *King Kong* in 1933, they were cut out of the final version because the producers thought that the scene of them eating humans was too scary.

Water scorpions were distant relatives of the current terrestrial scorpions.

There is only one species of scorpion known to occur in Arkansas. It is the common striped bark scorpion, or *Centruroides vittatus*, and is rather abundant in the western part of the state, from deciduous and pine forests to grasslands.

Individuals of this species are not as big as their aquatic relatives of the past; they can reach 2.5 inches long, and have two broad, dark, longitudinal bands on the top side of the body.

Striped bark scorpions glow phosphorescent yellow under ultraviolet light.

Students studying entomology each fall at Arkansas State University are required to hand in an insect collection. Although scorpions are not insects, many students encounter them during collecting trips and include them in their collections.

Striped bark scorpions are particularly common between April and June and feed on spiders and many species of insects. Young scorpions cling to their mother's back for 5 to 15 days, reaching maturity after 3 or 4 years.

They tend to sting when people turn over wood or rocks to which they cling. Unless the person is allergic to the ven-

om, the sting is of minor medical consequence — basically it consists of immediate and sharp pain followed by local swelling.

Pain soon subsides, and it may be followed by a local sensation of numbness or tingling, indicating nerve irritation. In more extreme cases where individuals are stung by a more venomous species, the person stung may show chest tightness, nausea, vomiting and dizziness. Although severe allergic reactions and even death have been reported for a few individuals, death has never been reported for individuals stung by striped bark scorpions.

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