



Myth of the Camel Spider

There are many stories and myths about the camel spider. Some say that the camel spider can reach giant sizes. Other stories say that the camel spider injects a type of poison that will numb the skin so that the spider can eat huge chunks of flesh without being noticed. None of these stories are even half true!

To begin with, the camel spider isn't even a real spider! The camel spider, also called a wind scorpion or sun spider, is part of the order *solifugidae*. Like spiders, solifugids are part of the class *Arachnida*. All arachnids have eight legs, and two parts to their body: a *prosoma* (front half of the body, including the head) and an *opisthosoma* (back half of the body). But unlike spiders, solifugids don't have a 'waist' or *pedicel*. Also, although solifugids have eight legs, they only use six of them for walking. The first pair of legs is held out in front of them a little bit like antennae, so that the solifugid can feel where it is going.

Despite their reputation, solifugids aren't actually very big at all. They are only about one to two inches long, although one species, *Galeodes arabs*, can be up to six inches long when its legs are measured as well. One of the biggest features of the *solifugidae* is that they have huge jaws! Jaws on arachnids are called *chelicerae*. The *chelicerae* of camel spiders stick out in front of them.

Although camel spiders are *carnivorous* (meat eaters), they don't eat camels or people! Camel spiders prey on other insects, scorpions, lizards and sometimes mice. Some solifugids are *specialized*, and eat only one type of prey, such as termites, and some are *opportunistic*, and will eat whatever is around. It has been reported that sometimes solifugids will eat so much that they cannot move properly afterwards! To catch their prey, solifugids are able to move very quickly. It is their speed combined with their huge jaws that allow the camel spider to catch its food. No solifugid has any poison!

There are about 600 different groups of solifugids, and they live in many different parts of the world. Most live in the hotter and drier areas in North Africa and the Middle East, but there are some that live in the southern United States and southern Europe. It's probably due to its desert habitat that the camel spider has its name; like a camel, this solifugid lives in the desert. Many solifugids look a bit like camels: they are hairy, and either yellow, brown, or black. These colors help them blend in with their environment. The word *solifugidae* comes from Latin, and means "running from the sun". This is a very good description, because they are so fast, and also because solifugids are *nocturnal*. This means that they hide in burrows in the sand or under rocks during the day and come out to hunt and move at night. Solifugids are very good at digging, and can build burrows. Some solifugids will stay in the same burrow during the breeding season, while other species will make a new burrow every night. Even though they are nocturnal, they are attracted to lights such as lanterns and fires.

Depending on the species, a female solifugid will lay between 20 and 200 eggs. Eggs will hatch between a week and four weeks later. The initial larval stage cannot move and cannot eat, but after the first molt (shedding of its skin) the little solifugid will look like a miniature adult. The little solifugid grows quickly. Because solifugids live life on high speed, their lifespan tends to be about only one year.

Reading Comprehension

Name _____ Date _____

Even though camel spiders and other solifugids may look ferocious, unless you're a scorpion or desert insect, you have nothing to worry about!!

Name _____ Date _____

Answer the following questions on camel spiders and other solifugids.

1. What are two common myths about camel spiders?

2. Are camel spiders real spiders? To what order do camel spiders belong?

3. What does the word "solifugidae" mean?

4. What is the most noticeable thing about the body of a camel spider?

5. Describe the appearance of a camel spider.

6. What does a camel spider eat?

7. What does a camel spider rely on to catch its food?

8. Where do most solifugids live?

9. What does 'nocturnal' mean?

10. If you were camping in the desert and had a campfire, would you be likely to see a camel spider? Would you be scared? Explain your answer.

Name _____ Date _____

Answers to questions on camel spiders and solifugids.

1. Two common myths about camel spiders are that they can grow to be enormous and that they inject poison and then feed on camels and people.
2. Camel spiders are not real spiders, but they are closely related. Camel spiders belong to the order solifugidae.
3. The word “solifugidae” comes from Latin and means “running from the sun”.
4. The most noticeable thing about the body of a camel spider are its jaws or chelicerae.
5. A camel spider’s body has two parts: a prosoma and an opisthosoma. A camel spider lacks a waist or pedicel. Camel spiders are hairy and are usually brown, yellow or black. The camel spider has 8 legs, but doesn’t use the front pair to walk.
6. Camel spiders are carnivorous, and eat insects, scorpions, spiders, lizards and sometimes, small mammals such as mice. Some solifugids specialize on prey, such as termites.
7. A camel spider relies on its speed and large jaws to catch prey. It does not have any poison.
8. Most solifugids live in sandy, stony desert regions in North Africa and the Middle East. There are some that live in the southern United States and southern Europe.
9. Nocturnal means to sleep during the day and be active at night.
10. If you had a campfire in the desert in a region where solifugids live you would almost definitely see one. Solifugids are attracted to light such as lanterns and campfires.

The second half of the question is up to the individual student.