

On the occurrence of the scorpion *Euscorpium flavicaudis* (DeGeer) at Sheerness Port, Isle of Sheppey, Kent

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On 2 September 1975, Dr D. T. Jones, The Medical Officer of Health, Port and City of London, sent to the British Museum (Natural History) two scorpions which had been forwarded to Guildhall by the Divisional Port Health Inspector at Sheerness. It was also reported that six live scorpions had been seen inhabiting the defective pointing in the old dockyard boundary wall near the main entrance. In addition ten live specimens had been located at a site close to the passenger ferry terminal (Plate 2). The specimens were *Euscorpium flavicaudis* (DeGeer), a small species that normally occurs in the Mediterranean region. *E. flavicaudis* has previously been

recorded from Sheerness Port by Cloudsley-Thompson (1958). There are also several unpublished records from Sheerness supported by specimens in the BM(NH) collection; a male, from a house in 1959, and a female, found by a Post Office engineer in an underground telephone junction box at the entrance to the dockyard, in October 1972. Most of the scorpions have until now been regarded as chance importations or as temporary residents but recent investigations have shown that *E. flavicaudis* appears to have established a colony associated with old buildings and the old perimeter wall of the dockyard. The colony has possibly been in existence for more than 100 years (a specimen in the Museum's collection is dated 1870).

E. flavicaudis (Plate 1) is a small scorpion about 4 cm long. The body (including the pedipalps and tail) is black but the legs and telson (sting) are light brownish. It is readily distinguished from other species of *Euscorpium* by the characteristic pattern of trichobothria on the pedipalp chela (Vachon 1952, 1962, 1975). The species is noted for occurring in isolated localities (Simon 1879) and for being capable

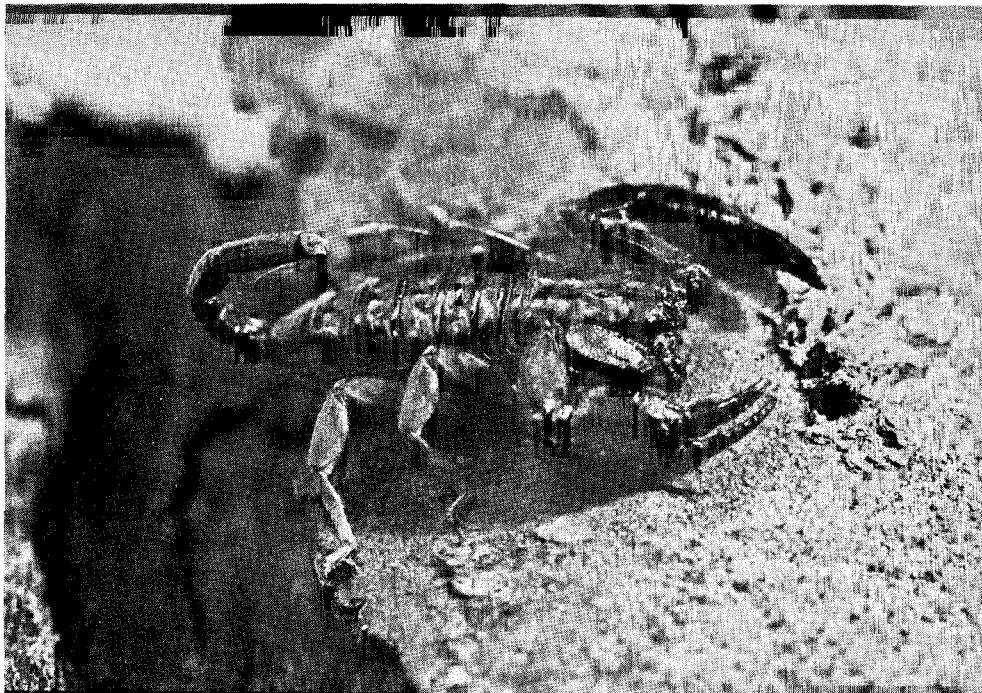


Plate 1: *Euscorpium flavicaudis* (DeGeer).

of adapting quickly to suitable habitats (Fage 1929). In more southern parts of its range it lives in the open, under stones and bark but it is also found in buildings and houses and has founded numerous colonies in Central and West France (Berland 1945). It is not generally associated with ports and shipping but Vachon and Roman (1968) report that several specimens collected in Lyon, France, were taken from a house situated opposite the port installations.

It seems reasonable to assume that the Sheerness colony is well established for during a brief visit to the dockyard in September 1975 the author found, during the daytime, two juvenile specimens within the space of 15 minutes. One specimen was in the open on the perimeter wall, and the other was in sparse vegetation growing at the base of the wall. The live scorpions referred to by Dr D. T. Jones above, were also seen during the daytime in August 1975 by Mr A. Terrible of the Port Health Authority; the specimens were located without difficulty and on both occasions found within the space of 30 minutes. Some of the older dock workers can recall scorpions

being found in the past and the tradition would appear to go back to the days of sailing ships.

Most reports refer to scorpions seen during the daytime, on south-facing parts of old buildings, the old perimeter wall or new offices situated near the wall. However since scorpions are generally nocturnal these daytime observations need further investigation as they suggest possible changes in behaviour which may account for the species being able to establish itself so far north. It could also be significant that Sheppey has a relatively low mean annual rainfall of only 18 inches compared with 24 for London and 60 inches for Devon and Cornwall.

Sheerness Port was opened in 1660 and rebuilt in 1823. It was closed in 1960 by the Admiralty and was then rapidly redeveloped as an industrial estate and commercial port. The old perimeter wall, ruined army barracks and other old buildings are constructed of the same type of brickwork and probably all date from 1823. Prospects for the continued presence of the colony seem to be good as access to the docks is restricted and the scorpions have already survived a

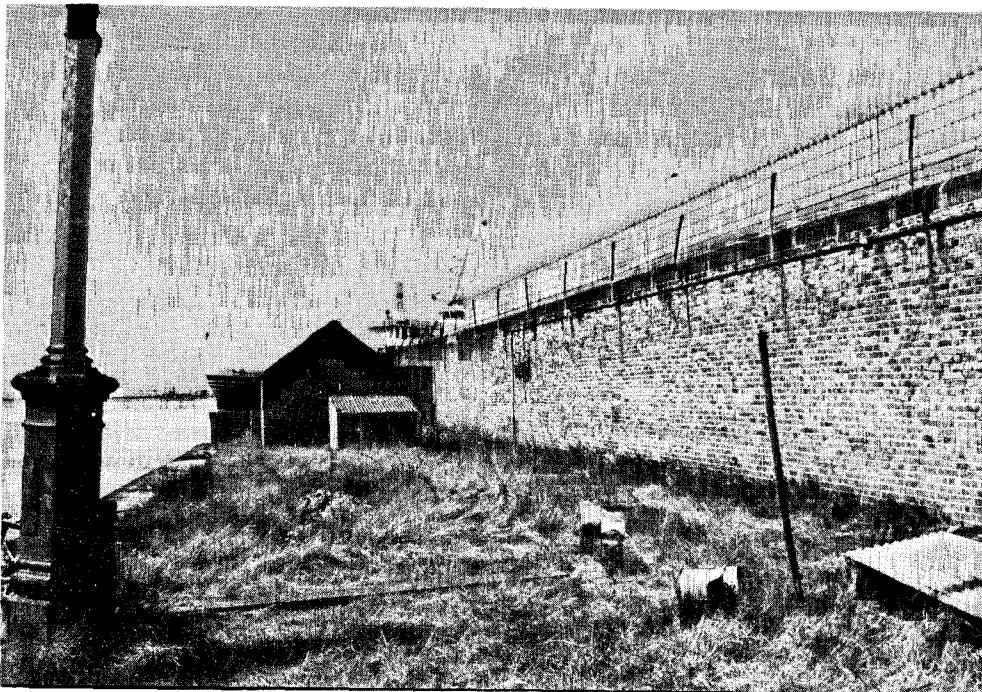


Plate 2: Sheerness dockyard, showing part of the old south-facing perimeter wall adjacent to the Ferry terminal.

long period of commercial development. Food appears to be plentiful as the remaining patches of rough grassland and an allotment are surprisingly rich in insect life with grasshoppers and flies, and spiders also being particularly abundant during my visit.

It should be noted that *E. flavicaudis* is a harmless species that does not show aggressive tendencies and the sting, a mere pin prick, is of no consequence.

Acknowledgements

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