

1 **Neural Circuit Recording from an Intact Cockroach Nervous System**

2
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10 **KEYWORDS** electrophysiology, neural circuit, cockroach, neuroethology

11 **SHORT ABSTRACT:**

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13
14 This article describes the cockroach ventral nerve cord dissection and extracellular
15 recordings from the cercal nerve and connectives. Evoked responses are generated by
16 electrical stimulation of the cercal nerve or direct mechanical stimulation of the cerci.
17

18 **LONG ABSTRACT:**

19
20 The cockroach ventral nerve cord preparation is a tractable system for neuroethology
21 experiments, neural network modeling, and testing the physiological effects of
22 insecticides. This article describes the scope of cockroach sensory modalities that can be
23 used to assay how an insect nervous system responds to environmental perturbations.
24 Emphasis here is on the escape behavior mediated by cerci to giant fiber transmission in
25 *Periplaneta americana*. This intact preparation requires only moderate dissecting skill
26 and electrophysiological expertise to generate reproducible recordings of neuronal
27 activity. Peptides or other chemical reagents can then be applied directly to the nervous
28 system in solution with the physiological saline. Insecticides could also be administered
29 prior to dissection and the escape circuit can serve as a proxy for the excitable state of the
30 central nervous system. In this context the assays described herein would also be useful
31 to researchers interested in limb regeneration and the evolution of nervous system
32 development for which *P. americana* is an established model organism.
33

34 **INTRODUCTION:**

35
36 There are more than 4000 cockroach species but only about 30 are household
37 pests. Perhaps the most recognized is the misnamed American cockroach *Periplaneta*
38 *americana* which originated in Africa, and is now found nearly everywhere on the planet.
39 In addition to its rapid running speed¹ and evasive behavior, in the tropics *P. americana* is
40 capable of flight^{2,3}.

41
42 The predominant characteristics of the cockroach central nervous system (CNS) are its
43 segmented nature and decentralization of control processes^{4,5}. The brain, thoracic and
44 abdominal ganglia are joined together by paired interganglionic connectives to form the

45 ventral nerve cord (VNC).

46

47 The ganglia at each segment are integrating centers. They are composed of an outer,
48 cortical region containing cells responsible for the blood-brain permeability barrier just
49 beneath them, and the somata of neurons originating in that ganglion. These somata may
50 belong to interneurons, modulatory neurons or motor neurons. They supply axons that
51 remain within the ganglion of origin (local interneuron), or axons that project between the
52 ganglia of the CNS (interganglionic interneurons) or that terminate on peripheral muscle
53 cells (motor neurons). Most somata are positioned ventrally or ventrolaterally in the
54 ganglionic cortex⁵. The paired, interganglionic connectives contain only axons and no
55 neuronal cell bodies.

56

57 The neuropil of a ganglion contains glial cells (neuroglia), axon tracts, bundles of axons
58 and dendrites (neurites) of neurons. The neuropil is devoid of neuronal cell bodies. This is
59 the region within the ganglion where direct synaptic communication among nerve cells
60 and integration of inputs occur.

61

62 The ability of the American cockroach *P. americana* to detect and suddenly respond to
63 an approaching predator (foot, hand, etc.) has been attributed to a reflex circuit that
64 consists of the cerci and giant fiber system^{6,7}. The cerci are a pair of horn-like,
65 wind-sensitive structures located on the end of the abdomen (Figure 1). In *P. americana*
66 the ventral surface of each cercus contains about 200 filiform (thread) hairs that are
67 organized into 14 columns. Nine of these columns can be consistently identified in
68 different animals according to the response properties of the associated receptor cell and
69 axon. Each hair is in a socket that allows it to bend most readily in one plane that is
70 column specific. Movement of the hair in one direction along its plane induces a
71 depolarization in the receptor cell and a burst of action potentials (APs) in the sensory
72 neuron. Movement in the opposite direction inhibits any ongoing spontaneous APs⁸. The
73 preferred plane of deflection and directionality of the response is different in each column.
74 Thus, the filiform hair-receptor complexes are responsible not only for detecting the
75 movement of air but also for 'coding', in the form of APs, the direction from which the air
76 current originated. Processing of this information by the CNS results in an 'appropriate'
77 escape response^{6,7}. This functional, columnar specificity of the sensory hairs is
78 preserved from animal to animal.

79

80 The receptor cell of each filiform hair is responsible for transducing the mechanical
81 deflection of the hair into a neural event (resulting in a burst or inhibition of APs in the
82 receptor cell's axon⁹). The APs travel to the terminal abdominal ganglion (A6) via cercal
83 nerve XI, where they synapse with giant axons of the ventral nerve cord (VNC). The giant
84 axons are believed to be responsible for the transmission and subsequent excitation of
85 motor neurons that results in an escape behavior^{6,10,11}.

86

87 The behavioral latency of the escape response of *P. americana* is one of the shortest of
88 any animal⁷. Behavioral latency is the time between the arrival of a stimulus at a

89 mechanoreceptor and the initiation of an escape response. In experiments using high
90 speed cinematography to record the attempted escape from an attacking toad, the
91 cockroach was observed to begin its turn away from the toad in about 40 ms (time from
92 beginning of tongue extension to cockroach movement ^{7,12}. Using controlled wind puffs,
93 the behavioral latency could be reduced to 11 ms. Other experiments revealed that a
94 minimum wind puff velocity of 12 mm.s⁻¹ (with an acceleration of 600 mm.(s⁻²) can evoke
95 an escape response, while even lower velocities (3 mm.s⁻¹) caused slowly walking
96 cockroaches to stop moving ¹².

97
98 The strong correlation that typically exists between giant fiber systems and escape
99 behavior has been well documented ^{13,14}. In instances where a particular cell is necessary
100 and sufficient to evoke a particular behavior the cell is referred to as a command neuron
101 ^{15,16}. Giant interneurons (GIs) in the wind escape circuit of *P. americana* are not
102 necessary for the reflex. Animals that have experimentally ablated GIs still exhibit the
103 escape behavior therefore these GIs are not considered command neurons ^{17,18}.
104 Severing cervical connectives that are rostral to the sensorimotor circuit also influences
105 the behavior, indicating that descending input from the brain has an effect on the direction
106 of escape ¹⁹. These aspects of fine control and redundancy are paramount to the
107 organism's survival and are complemented by neurochemical modulation via biogenic
108 amines ²⁰.

109
110 The *P. americanus* nerve cord preparation has been an elegant model system for
111 neuroethologists over the past many decades starting with the pioneering work of Roeder
112 ²¹. It permits students to record, display and analyze primary sensory activity and the
113 resultant responses by giant interneurons to their input ^{22,23,24}. In addition to conveying the
114 idea that identifiable neural circuits underlie behavioral responses to the environment,
115 these exercises should instill an appreciation for the biological contributions made by this
116 common household pest.

117 118 **PROTOCOL:**

119 120 **1) Dissection**

121
122 1.1) Select a male cockroach from the holding tank that has robust cerci (Figure 1). The
123 last segments of the male are narrow compared to the female; and containing no ovaries
124 and egg mass, males are easier to dissect. The males of *P. americana* have a pair of
125 short styli between the cerci. These styli are not observed in the females.

126 1.2) Cut off the wings, legs and head and pin the body, ventral side up, to a dish lined with
127 silicone elastomer.

128
129 1.3) With forceps pick up the ventral plates and cut them off with fine scissors, starting at
130 the posterior end and working anteriorly. Always keep the internal organs moist with
131 Ringer's while trying to keep the cerci dry. One can use wax or pieces of rubber to position
132 the abdomen upwards to prevent the saline from wetting the cerci. If they do get wet, dry

133 them with a piece of tissue paper. Push to the side the internal organs and the white
134 matter (fat body). The VNC is in the center of the field, runs the length of the abdomen and
135 should be visible between the shiny trachea. The nerve cord is translucent and may
136 initially be difficult to see until the lighting is adjusted properly (Figure 2). DO NOT handle
137 the VNC with forceps or insect pins, instead manipulate it using glass probes.
138

139 1.4) Clear away the animal's tracheae system as best as possible from the nerve cord
140 with forceps and with a pair of fine glass needles, very carefully split the VNC connectives
141 longitudinally between A6 and A5 or A5 and A4 ganglia (Figure 3). Cradle the cerci and
142 abdomen upwards out of the saline bath with shortened insect pins and wax or a wedge of
143 the silicone elastomer that can be cut to fit the preparation (Figure 4A,B). Be extra careful
144 in the last abdominal segment not to damage the cercal nerves that project into the
145 ganglion (Figures 2D and 5).

146 147 **2) Extracellular recording**

148
149 2.1) The dissected preparation, microscope, and recording apparatus should be setup
150 inside a Faraday cage to block external, particularly AC, electric fields that could override
151 signals from neurons (Figure 6).
152

153 2.2) Position the microscope so that it is overlooking the microscope stage. Once it is
154 placed on the stage, you will need to adjust the position of the high intensity illuminator
155 beam to best visualize the preparation.
156

157 2.3) Connect the AC/DC differential amplifier to the integrated data recording unit (details
158 on the specific hardware and software settings have been previously described ²⁵). The
159 headstage holding a microelectrode should be connected to the amplifier. A silver ground
160 wire that has been coated with Cl⁻ can be inserted into the abdomen, which results in
161 more stable recordings. The reason is if the solution in the body cavity is not in contact
162 with the bathing fluid in the dish, the fluid associated with the recording electrode remains
163 grounded.
164

165 2.4) Set the recording frequency to 4 kHz. Set the voltage scale (y-axis) to 500 mV (this
166 can be adjusted to optimize visualization of the trace). Run the recording software in
167 continuous or oscilloscope mode to record neural activity in response to stimulations.
168

169 2.5) Cut one of the VNC connectives close to A5 and place the cut end attached to A6
170 into a suction electrode. Be sure to pull Ringer's into the suction electrode to cover the
171 silver wire inside it before sucking in the nerve.
172

173 2.6) With a dry pipette blow air on to the hairs located on each cercus. See if stimulating
174 the hairs on the cercus ipsilateral to the recorded connective gives a different response
175 than the contralateral one. Take note of the amplitude of the responses and the number
176 of spikes in a given time interval during the stimulation.

177
178 2.7) Move the suction electrode to a cercal nerve for recording. To get a better fit, you
179 may have to switch to an electrode tip with a smaller opening.

180
181 2.8) Cut the cercal nerve close to A6 and then suck up the nerve leading to the cercus.
182 There should be spontaneous firing of action potentials. Now, blow air onto the cercus
183 and note the responses.

184
185 **3) Electrically stimulating the sensory nerves to determine recruitment**

186
187 3.1) Change the recording software to sweep mode so that it records traces (100-500
188 msec.) each time a stimulus is triggered.

189
190 3.2) Connect the stimulating electrode to the output of the stimulator.

191
192 3.3) Connect the stimulator cable with the two mini-hook leads or clips.

193
194 3.4) Connect the BNC trigger output from the stimulator to the trigger input on the
195 recording unit.

196
197 3.5) The following stimulation parameters should evoke a response: Duration: 0.3 sec;
198 Delay: 10 msec; Frequency: 1 Hz; Voltage: adjust as needed to obtain a signal in the
199 recordings (just over threshold and being able to obtain a maximal response). There is no
200 reason to go to voltages much higher than maximal threshold for recruitment as a high
201 voltage can be damaging to the nerve.

202
203 3.6) Cut the cercal nerve as distal as possible so that a long nerve root can be pulled into
204 the stimulating suction electrode (Figure 7, arrow head). The connective between A6 and
205 A5 or another segment more anterior can be used.

206
207 3.7) Set the recording suction electrode so you can pull up a cut connective into the
208 electrode. Be sure to pull some Ringer's into the suction electrodes to cover the silver
209 wire inside it before sucking in the nerves. Make sure the stimulating electrode is also
210 grounded in the bath saline (in the abdomen near A3 is ideal).

211
212 3.8) Deliver a series of single stimuli of increasing voltage until an action potential
213 appears on the screen. One should make a record of the minimal stimulating voltage and
214 duration to recruit a response. Increase the intensity until a synaptic response in the
215 connectives is observed. The large spike (extracellular APs) from the giant axons
216 appears first, and then other smaller AP's may also be observed.

217
218 **REPRESENTATIVE RESULTS:**

219
220 Stimulation of hairs on the cerci by a puff of air causes discharges of primary sensory

221 neurons that can be recorded using extracellular suction electrodes attached either to
222 connectives between abdominal ganglia or the cercal nerve itself (Figure 8). Spike
223 amplitudes recorded from the two regions are on the order of several micro-volts.
224 Because of sensory integration in the ganglion the number of spikes observed in the
225 compound action potential or as individual spikes recorded from the cercal nerve is
226 remarkably greater than observed in recordings from the connectives. However Also
227 note that there is substantially less noise in the recoding at the connective due to the
228 tighter seal between the electrode and the nervous tissue.

229
230 By puffing air at the cerci large spikes are able to be observed in the connectives (Figure
231 8A). Using this stimulating paradigm, recordings the connectives between A3 and A4
232 typically show a large spike characteristic of the giant interneuron(s) Recording from a
233 cercal nerve while physically rubbing the cerci with tweezers produced a strong burst of
234 activity(Figure 8B1). In another recording, 2 puffs of air each produced a rapid bursting
235 response in the cercal nerve (Figure 8B2). When electrically stimulating the cercal nerve
236 with a suction electrode and recording in the connective between A3 and A4, one can
237 observe a threshold in the stimulation to evoked responses (Figure 8C1). The electrical
238 stimulation of the cercal nerve clearly elicits a response in connectives which can be
239 quantified for manipulative studies with pharmacological agents or the local
240 environmental (Figure 8C2).

241 242 **DISCUSSION:**

243
244 One of the reasons for exhibiting techniques for this classical preparation is that the cerci
245 system has been and still is an active area of research in addressing questions of the
246 development of neural circuitry as well as questions regarding synaptic repair and
247 regeneration²⁶⁻³¹. Either paradigm of evoking activity in the cockroach ventral nerve cord
248 can be used to examine the effects of pharmacological agents or insecticides on nervous
249 system function. These experiments are done by simply dissolving neuroactive
250 chemicals into the Ringer's saline. After exchanging this solution with the normal bathing
251 medium, changes in evoked or spontaneous activity may be observed while recording
252 from connectives or a motor nerve to give a consistent readout of the chemical's effect
253 on CNS function.

254
255 As in all neurophysiological experiments a common problem is electrical noise. Probably
256 the biggest factor in signal quality for these preparations is the suction electrode seal on
257 the nerve tissue. A tight seal that does not completely draw in the cercal nerve or
258 connective is ideal. Recordings can also be made with dual hook electrodes placed under
259 the nerve cord and insulating the VNC with a mixture of mineral oil and petrolatum. The
260 mixture can be loaded into a syringe and expelled around the nerve cord³². Also a careful
261 dissection is as critical here as in any CNS preparation. Some may find it easier to access
262 the CNS by dissecting the dorsal cuticle. While this reduces the possibility of damaging
263 the ventral nerve cord it can be more difficult to remove all of the viscera using this
264 approach.

265
266 It is not described here but this preparation is amenable to intracellular recording in the
267 giant interneurons^{32,33}. The entire nerve cord can also be removed to accommodate
268 several recording and stimulating electrodes simultaneously. In fact exploration of the
269 antennal lobe, mushroom body, and other anterior CNS structures is still in progress³⁴⁻³⁵.
270 While the cockroach CNS continues to shed light on modern neurobiological research
271 this particular preparation is simple enough to be used in undergraduate academic
272 laboratories.

273

274 **FIGURE LEGENDS:**

275

276 Figure 1: *Periplaneta americana* with intact cerci.

277

278 Figure 2: Ventral view of cockroach nerve cord as seen with the ventral cuticle removed
279 (A). An enlarged view of the segment outlined by arrows is seen in (B). In (C) the
280 connectives were spilt between A4 and A3 with a glass probe. The 6th abdominal ganglion
281 is shown in (D) with the two cercal nerves leaving at the caudal end.

282

283 Figure 3: Schematic ventral view of cockroach nerve cord.

284

285 Figure 4: The cerci and are positioned upwards out of the saline bath. The opened
286 abdomen can be flooded with saline (A) with the caudal end of the roach being elevated
287 with a small wedged shaped piece of silicone elastomer in order to keep the cerci out of
288 the bath (B).

289

290 Figure 5: The 6th abdominal ganglion with the cercal nerve (outlined by arrows on one
291 side).

292

293 Figure 6: The equipment set up.

294

295 Figure 7: Stimulating and recording electrode set up.

296

297 Figure 8: Neural recordings of the connectives and cercal nerve with various stimulation
298 procedures. Recording with a suction electrode from the connectives between A3 and A4
299 while puffing air at the cerci (A). Recording from the primary cercal neurons with a suction
300 electrode while either physically rubbing (B1) or providing air puffs (B2) results in rapid
301 bursts of activity in the cercal nerve. Electrically stimulating the cercal nerve produces
302 responses in connectives (C1) Note the gradual increase in the stimulating intensity
303 (arrows indicate the amplitude of the stimulating artifact) and the intensity of the following
304 evoked responses. The electrical stimulation of the cercal nerve provides a relatively
305 more controlled means of stimulating the cercal nerve for consistency in stimulation for
306 quantifying the responses (C2).

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308

309 **DISCLOSURES:** The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.
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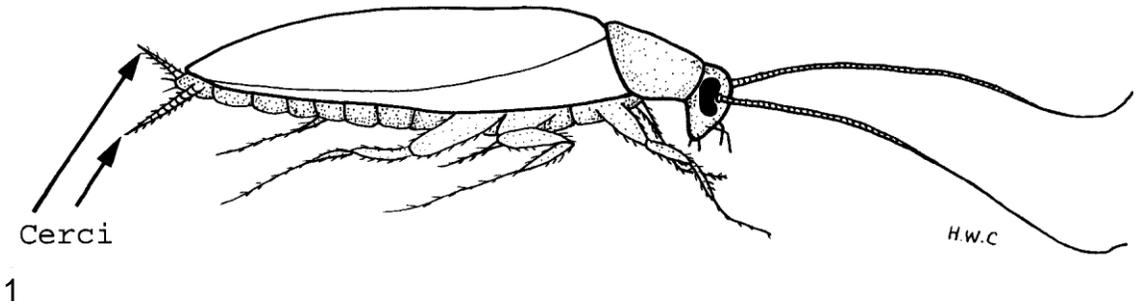
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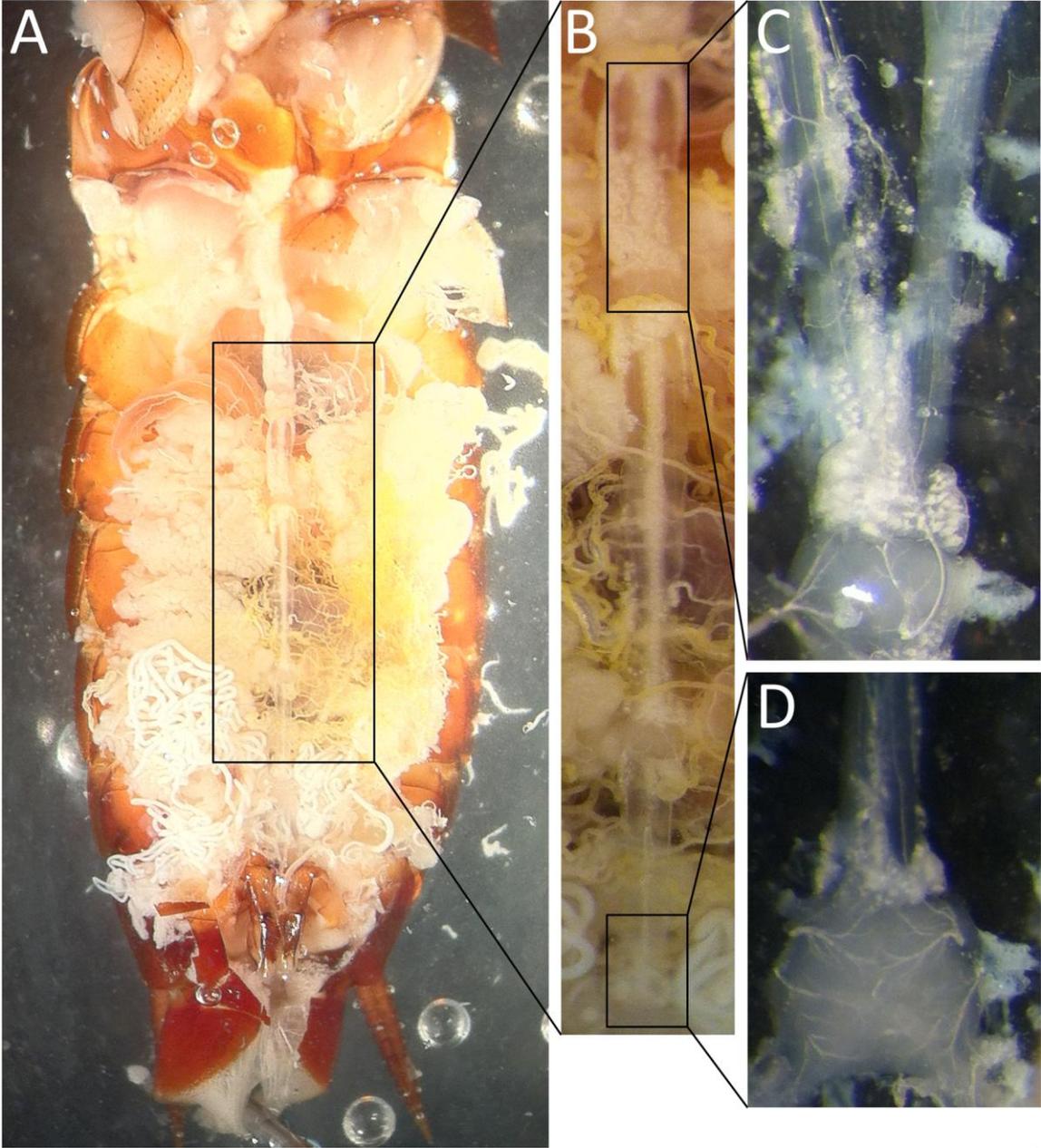
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- 416
- 417 Cockroach Ringer's solution³⁶: (grams for 100ml)
418 210 mM NaCl (1.227g)
419 2.9 mM KCl (0.0216g)
420 1.8 mM CaCl₂ (0.0265g)
421 0.2 mM NaH₂PO₄ 2H₂O (0.0032g)
422 1.8 mM Na₂HPO₄ 7H₂O (0.0483g)
423 (pH 7.2 Adjust pH with 1 M NaOH or 1 M HCl).
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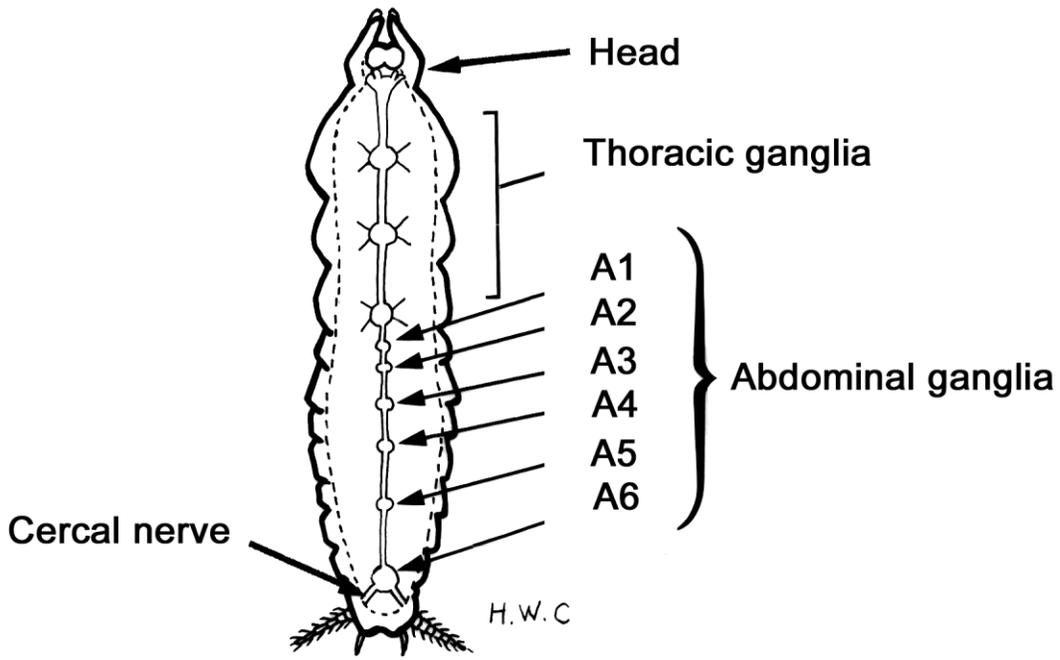
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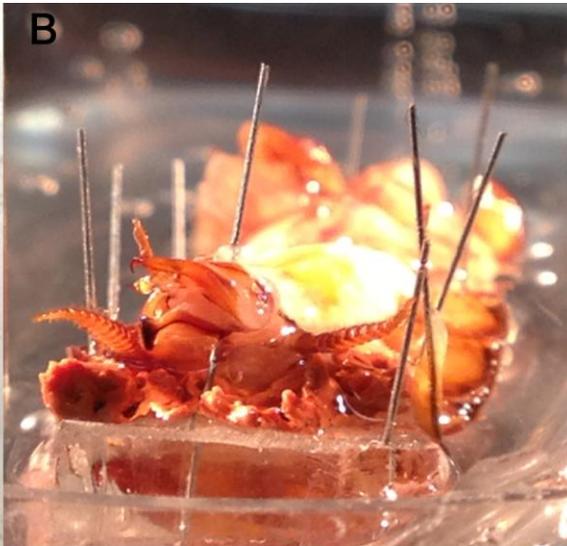


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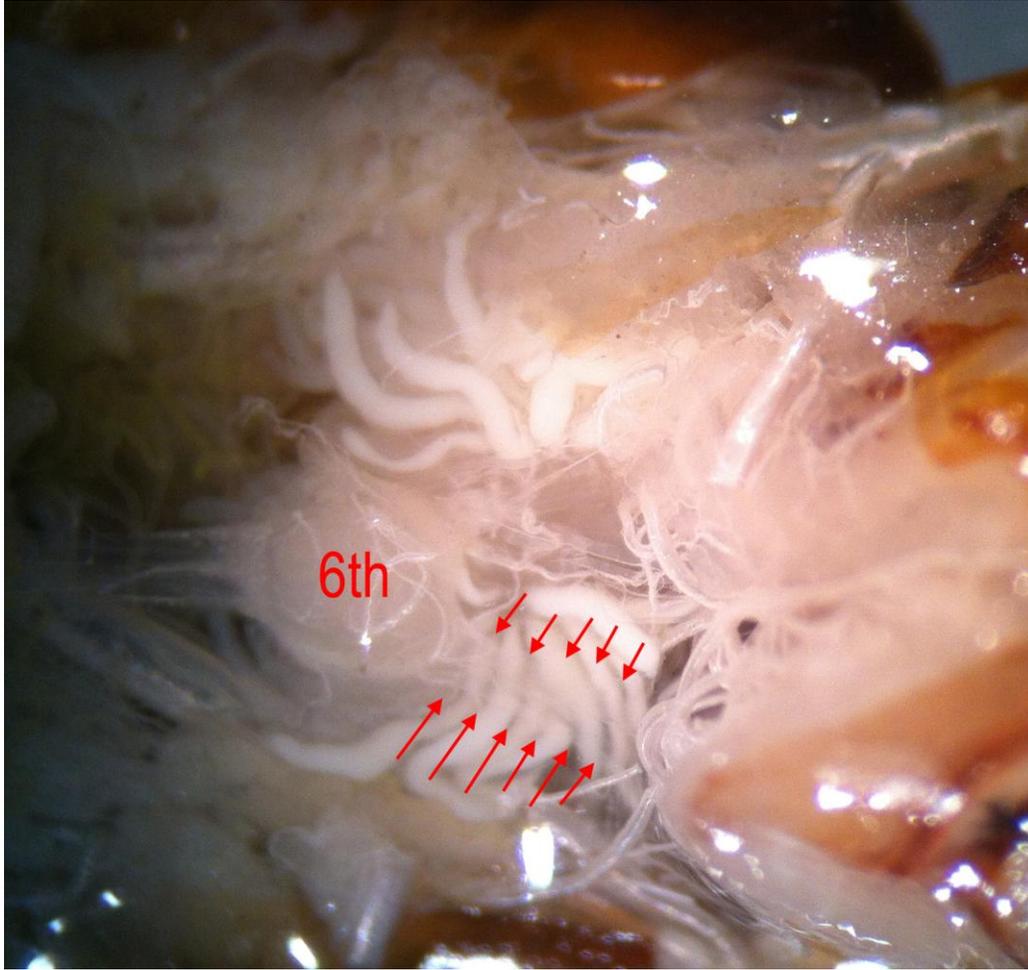
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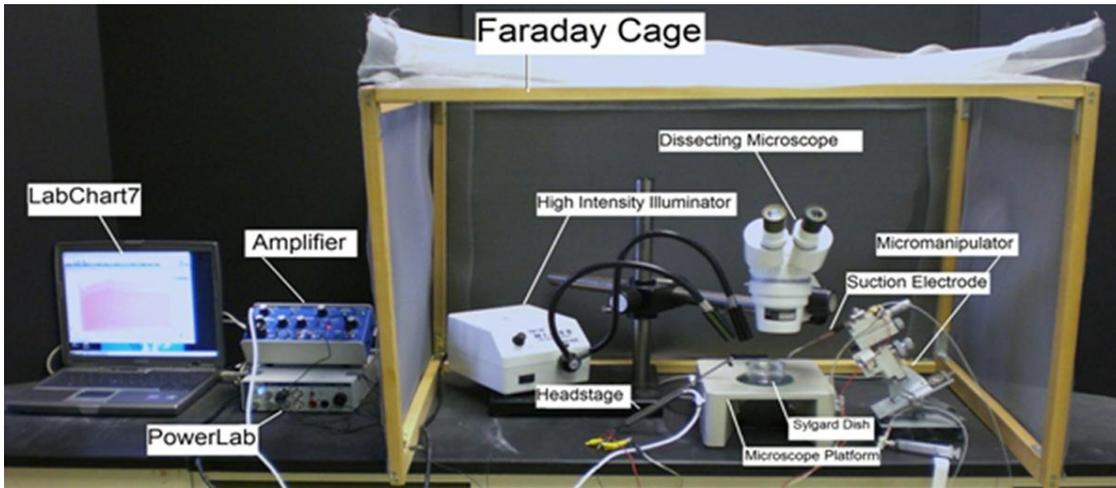
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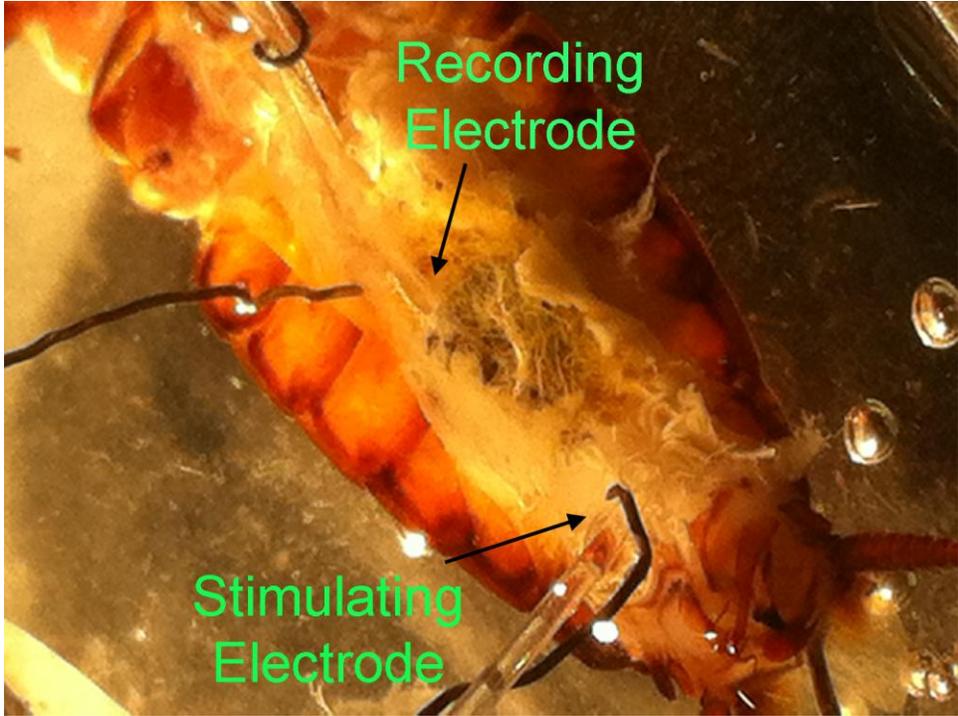
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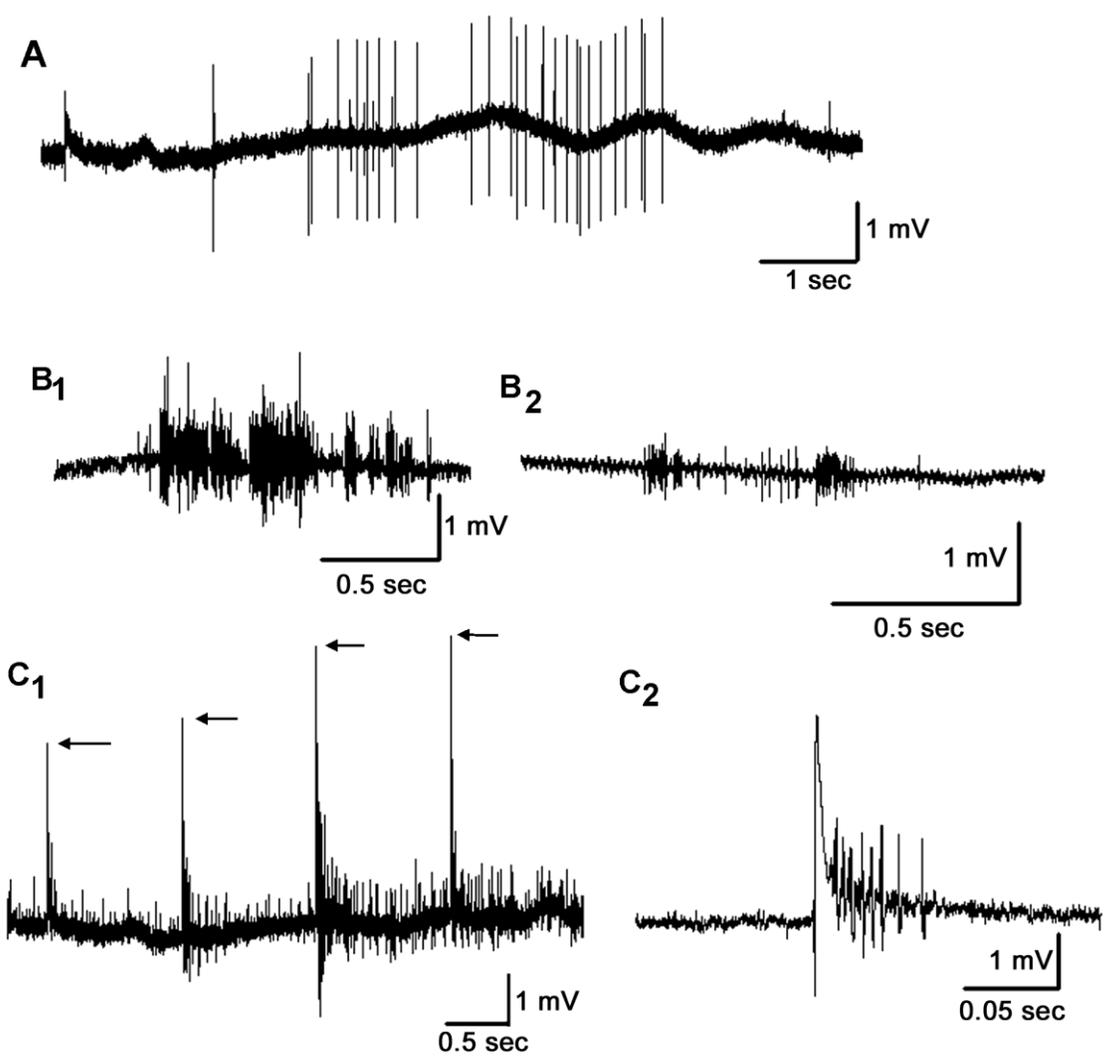
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