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APB Infonote - Meat ants

John van Schagen
john.vanschagen@agric.wa.gov.au

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MEAT ANTS

What you should know about meat ants

Meat-ants (Iridomyrmex purpureus) are native to Australia and are common in most country areas.

Nest mounds

Meat ants build large nests which consist of raised, disc-like or oval mounds of up to approximately 1.5 m in diameter. These mounds have many entrances leading to separate galleries and nesting chambers.

Mounds are usually covered with gravel or sticks, which act as a heat sink, trapping solar energy during the day. Mounds are usually located in open, unshaded areas. Meat ants will often relocate nests that become shaded by overhanging branches.

Why meat ants are pests

Meat ants are very territorial in their behaviour and tend to become aggressive when interfered with. They do not possess a sting, however they can bite.

Meat ants can be a nuisance because of their foraging activity in and around homes. They often nest near farm gates, which can be unpleasant for the person opening the gate. Orchardists and wildflower growers are sometimes bitten by meat ants when picking their produce.

They are aggressive towards intruders and often irritate cattle and sheep by climbing on them and biting their legs and snouts. Large numbers of meat ants are often found in places such as milking sheds and near feeding troughs.

Meat ants ‘farm’ aphids and scale insects on trees in orchards and can encourage small outbreaks of these pests. Aphids and scale are sap-sucking insects; they excrete honeydew which the ants feed on. Large populations of scales and aphids often result in black sooty mould on fruit and leaves.

Bite – don’t sting

“Farm” aphids and scale

What you should look for

Identification

Meat ants are up to 10 mm in length and have reddish-brown fore parts with a darker abdomen.

Other colour forms are also known such as orange, reddish-purple or blue with dark abdomen. Their body is covered with sparse short hairs.

What you should look for

Habits of meat ants

Most of the ants travel in long trails that radiate from the mound. These trails are very obvious as they are cleared of vegetation. However, some ants scatter throughout the territory in search for food.

Meat ants normally forage during the day in temperatures ranging from about 15°C to 43°C. They are mainly active in the warmer months from spring to late autumn.

They are omnivorous; their food includes other insects, some seeds and honeydew. They are often found trailing to and from trees and shrubs.

(Continued overleaf)
Social life – colonies

Meat ants usually build their colonies in open areas such as paddocks and dirt tracks. Many colonies may be found in one area, although ants from different colonies will fight with each other.

When a colony’s territory is invaded (by other insects, other animals or people) large numbers of meat ants rush out of the nest to defend themselves and their territory. Large numbers also emerge to exploit a new food source when one is located.

During spring, new queens leave the colony and start to dig a new nest in the vicinity of the old one. Often, workers from the mature colony kill queens that dig too close to the existing nest, but sometimes they help them start the new colony.

Many new queens are also killed by predators such as birds and other insects.

Control of meat ants:

- Chlorpyrifos
- Diazinon
- Fenthion
- Permethrin
- Deltamethrin

The only effective way to control meat ants is to find the nest and treat it with a chemical insecticide.

Any insecticide registered for ant control can be used to eradicate the colony. Liquid sprays are more effective than dusts or granules. Suitable insecticides include organo-phosphorous compounds such as chlorpyrifos, diazinon, and fenthion and synthetic pyrethroids such as permethrin and deltamethrin.

Spray the entire nest mound as well as the individual entrance holes. Meat ants can survive underground for a long period because they store food in the nest chambers, therefore it may be necessary to repeat the treatment after two weeks.

For very large nests apply a superficial spray over the surface when the ants are active, to reduce numbers. Then, respray the nest the following day, injecting the liquid down as many holes as possible.

You can buy ant control chemicals from hardware shops, garden centres or agricultural chemical suppliers (see Yellow Pages).

Read the label before applying and mixing of the chemical and follow directions exactly.

Alternatively, get a licensed Pest Control Operator to treat the mounds.

Where to find out more

For further information on meat ants contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Baron-Hay Court, South Perth 6151. Telephone (09) 368 3472 or the nearest country office of the APB or the Department of Agriculture.

Text by John van Schagen Photos by Robyn Knox