

KEEP WATCH FOR FOREIGN FIRE ANTS



Above: Red imported fire ants are distinguished by the large mounds they build.

*Photo – 'Bart' Drees
Texas A&M University*

Left: Close-up of the red ants.

*Photo – Scott Bauer
United States Department of
Agriculture*

Western Australian metropolitan and rural residents are urged to keep an eye open for any unusual, small, red ants. Red imported fire ants (*Solenopsis invicta*) are a South American species and were found in Brisbane early in 2001. They have the potential to seriously threaten agriculture, the environment and people.

While, to date, there have been no reports of the pest in WA, authorities are concerned that the red imported fire ant, which is rapidly establishing itself in Queensland, could spread into other States.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management is working

with Agriculture WA (AGWEST) and the Health Department of WA to collate information about the threat of this pest being introduced into this State.

Department of Conservation and Land Management Senior Technical Officer Tom Burbidge said the threat shouldn't be underestimated.

"Many people believe it's not so much a matter of if this pest reaches WA, but when—it's only a matter of time," Tom said.

"Red imported fire ants compete with native species of insects, reptiles, birds and mammals for food, displacing them from their natural habitat. Taking into consideration our already

threatened animal species, there's no time to lose."

AGWEST entomologist Peter Davis said there was always a risk that the red imported fire ant could have 'hitched a lift' on a transport vehicle or among cargo, especially earth-moving equipment, travelling from Queensland to WA.

"However, WA has an extensive database of ants that have been reported as part of the surveillance for Argentine ants, so we have a high degree of confidence that red imported fire ants haven't established themselves here. But we need to undertake this public survey to increase our certainty," he said.

The red imported fire ant looks very similar to many other common ants, is 2–6 millimetres long and red to brown in colour. It is

distinguished by large ant mounds, which are commonly 30–40 centimetres high, but can be up to 60 centimetres high and one metre wide. Another unique feature of the ant is its stings, which form painful pustules (pimples) in people within 24 hours.

Peter said that red imported fire ants needed water to survive. Perth and the south-west of WA could provide suitable habitats in summer, especially in reticulated gardens and parks, along waterways, wetlands, freshwater lakes, ponds and streams.

"They can also deter livestock from feeding grounds, while their mounds can interfere with machinery in crop paddocks and orchards," he said.

"Early detection is the key to preventing this pest from becoming established and requiring an expensive baiting campaign, such as that now under way in Queensland."

The public can assist greatly in the survey by submitting unfamiliar specimens for identification. As there are more than 2,000 native species of ants in Australia, it is only by examination of specimens that the existence of red imported fire ants can be detected.

Specimens can be easily submitted by sticking about a dozen suspect ants to clear sticky tape and sticking that to a piece of paper with the collector's contact details. All can be posted to: Red Imported Fire Ant Surveillance, Agriculture Western Australia, Locked Bag No. 4, Bentley Delivery Centre, WA, 6983.

Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

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Executive Editor: Ron Kawallalak.
Editors: David Gough.
Story editors: Verna Costello, Sue McKenna, Carolyn Thomson-Dans.
Scientific/technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Keith Morris, Paul Jones and staff of Science Division.
Design and production: Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Gooitzen van der Meer.
Illustration: Gooitzen van der Meer.
Marketing: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (08) 9334 0296 Fax: (08) 9334 0498.
Subscription enquiries: ☎ (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.
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Thirteen years in the making, the Cape to Cape Track offers a unique view of WA's most popular national park. See page 28.



Karijini's new visitor centre provides a cultural and environmental focus point for visitors. See 'Karijini Calling' on page 10.



Dirk Hartog Island is our largest island. It has a fascinating history and a valuable biodiversity. Find out why on page 17.



'Landscape at the Heart' is an account of the first LANDSCOPE Expedition to the Carnarvon Range at the edge of the Little Sandy Desert. See page 40.



Does the delicate work of Western Australia's botanical artists have a place in the high-tech world of science? See page 23.

COVER

Aboriginal names have always been part of Australia's history, and many of the well known names for Australian animals are in common use today. 'Ancient animals, ancient names' (page 35) makes a case for adopting more Aboriginal names for our native mammals. The brush-tailed phascogale, for example, was known to Nyoongar people as the 'wambenga'.

Cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky

