KEEP WATCH FOR FOREIGN FIRE ANTS



Above: Red imported fire ants are distinguished by the large

Left: Close-up of the red ants.

United States Department of

Western Australian metropolitan and rural residents are urged to keep an eve 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

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.

environment and people.

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 earthmoving 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 Oueensland,"

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.

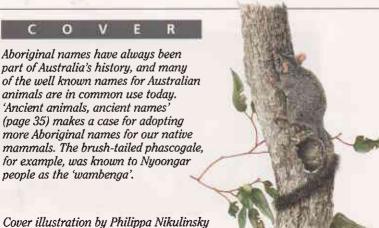
Specimens can be easily submitted by sticking about a dozen suspect ants to clear sticky tape and sticking that to a piece of paper with the collector's contact details. All can be posted to: Red Imported Fire Ant Surveillance, Agriculture Western Australia, Locked Bag No. 4, Bentley Delivery Centre,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



Thirteen years in the making, the Cape to Cape Track offers a unique view of WA's most popular national park. See page 28.



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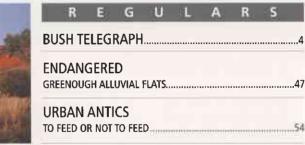


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'Landscape at the Heart' is an account of the first LANDSCOPE Expedition to the Carnarvon Range at the edge of the Little Sandy Desert. See page 40.

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Executive Editor: Ron Kawalilak.

Editors: David Gough. Story editors: Verna Costello, Sue McKenna, Carolyn Thomson-Dans.

UL

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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