

BUSH DETECTIVE

Ware – pit trap!



In summer people often notice small conical depressions in sandy soils, often near the base of trees or fallen logs. The pit can be up to 5cm in diameter and 2.5 cm deep, with loose sandy sides. In the base, hidden by loose sand, lurks an antlion, jaws upwards.

Antlion eggs are laid singly in dry soil, and the larvae dig a pit by crawling backwards in a small circle and flipping the sand outwards beyond the edge. Any insect moving within the edge of the pit starts an avalanche of sand. The antlion reacts by tossing sand upwards towards the intruder and causing a greater avalanche so that the insect tumbles to the bottom of the pit. There it is grabbed by the antlion's sharply-pointed, incurving jaws and sucked dry of juices. After eating, the remains are thrown out and the trap reset.

After three to four months the larva spins a silken cocoon, pupates, then emerges as the delicate, winged adult.

It is tempting to think of the antlion larvae as being "clever", but in fact they act by instinct, and can only catch prey in this one way. Put them in a box with hundreds of ants but no sand, and they'll starve to death.

