



ODOROUS HOUSE ANT

Insect Answers

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Odorous House Ant

Tapinoma sessile (Say), the odorous house ant, is a widely distributed native species found throughout the United States, in Canada, and Mexico. The common name of this insect is derived from a peculiar coconut-like odor produced in the anal glands.

Large populations of these ants live in western Washington, between Vancouver, British Columbia and Portland, Oregon. Odorous house ants are less common in the semidesert areas of the Pacific Northwest.

Identification

All odorous house ant workers are the same size (monomorphic). They differ from other ant species by the presence of a slit-like cloacal orifice without fringe hairs (Fig. 1). The antennae have 12 segments without a club (enlargement) at the tip. The promesonotal and mesoepinotal sutures are both distinct; the latter is even more distinct (Fig. 2). The single-segmented petiole (connection between thorax and abdomen) has no node (Fig. 2), a factor that distinguishes it from the ant in Fig. 3. Workers are approximately 1/16 inch long and have a uniform brown to black color.

Biology

Odorous house ants have adapted to a wide range of habitats and thrive nearly everywhere from sea level to about 10,500 feet. They nest in sand, pastures, grass fields, forests, bogs, and houses, frequently under stones and logs. They also build nests under stumps and the bark of dead trees, in bird and mammal nests, plant galls, and debris. Nests in soil are shapeless, shallow, and temporary, as the ants frequently move.

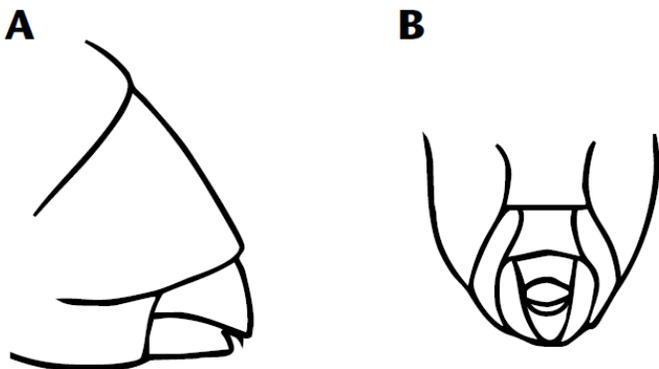


Fig. 1. Transverse ventral orifice (A. lateral view, B. ventral view).

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Colonies can consist of thousands of workers and usually contain many queens. New queens typically mate with their brothers within the colony. Some queens also mate with unrelated males. Nuptial flights occur only outside colonies, from June to mid-July. New colonies may form by budding when a new queen(s) leaves the parent colony with workers or as a single foundress queen.

Workers move fast and often travel in columns. When alarmed they run about erratically with abdomens tipped while releasing an alarm pheromone (the peculiar coconut-like odor), which draws more workers to the release site.

Workers collect honeydew excretions from mealybugs, aphids, scale insects, and plant hoppers and will protect these insects from predators. Workers also gather nectar from plants and feed on both living and dead insects.

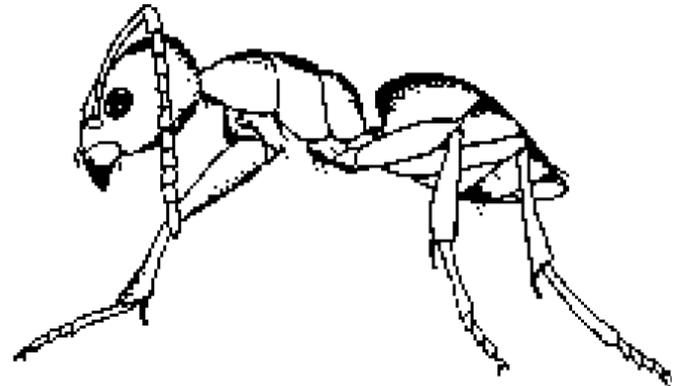


Fig. 2. *Tapinoma sessile* (odorous house ant).*

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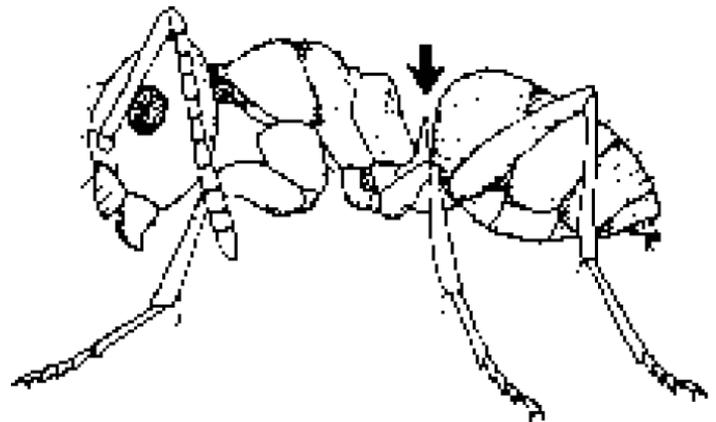


Fig. 3. *Lasius* spp. (Cornfield and other ants).*

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*Figures 2 and 3 have been modified from USDA Tech. Bull 1326.

Importance

Odorous house ants eat a wide variety of foodstuffs, such as meat, cooked vegetables, dairy products, fruit juices, and pastries. They have become a major nuisance pest by infesting houses.

Control

Control can be difficult. A homeowner may choose to hire a licensed pest control operator or apply a home formulation around the house foundation and under the siding to prevent infestation. Contact a WSU agent or clinician at the [Puyallup Plant Clinic](#) for current pesticide recommendations.

In addition to using chemical control, keep the home free of food debris, exposed stored food, or pet food. Keep counter tops and appliances free of grease or anything these ants might feed upon. These steps will help discourage indoor foraging.

Additional WSU Extension Publications on Ant

EB0818, *Carpenter Ants: Their Biology and Control*

EB1382, *Moisture Ants*

EB0929, *Thatching Ants*

EB1514E, *Pharaoh Ant*

EB0671, *Identification and Habits of Key Ant Pests of Washington*

These are available online at <http://pubs.wsu.edu/cgi-bin/pubs/index.html>.

Cover photo courtesy of Joseph Berger, Bugwood.org



Use pesticides with care. Apply them only to plants, animals, or sites as listed on the label. When mixing and applying pesticides, follow all label precautions to protect yourself and others around you. It is a violation of the law to disregard label directions. If pesticides are spilled on skin or clothing, remove clothing and wash skin thoroughly. Store pesticides in their original containers and keep them out of the reach of children, pets, and livestock.

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