Carpenter Ant Identification

There are several species of carpenter ants that may be found infesting homes and other buildings. Normally workers are black, or red and black, in color; and range in size from 3/8 to ½ inch. Winged queen ants may be as large as one inch. However, size is not a reliable characteristic for identifying carpenter ants. There is one species with workers no larger than 3/16 inch.

A colony of ants are divided into different castes: i.e. workers, queens, and males. Some ants, including carpenter ants, have different sized workers which help the nest with a range of jobs from food collecting to nest defense. The best method to distinguish carpenter ants from other ants is by the following characteristics: 1) a waist with one node (petiole) and 2) a thorax with an evenly rounded upper surface.

There are other ants that appear similar and are occasionally mistaken for carpenter ants. They may have one or two nodes. However, they can be distinguished from carpenter ants by the uneven profile of their thorax . These ants are usually not wood-infesting, so it is important to correctly identify the ants before control is attempted, as effective control strategies vary with different ant species.

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Fact Sheet

Carpenter Ants

In about five percent of fire ant sting cases, fire ants can actually cause death.

What they eat

Carpenter ants feed on sources of protein and sugar. Outdoors, carpenter ants feed on living and dead insects. They are also very attracted to honeydew, a sweet liquid produced by aphids and scale insects. Aphids and scales feed on trees, shrubs, and other plants. Indoors, carpenter ants feed on meats and pet food, as well as syrup, honey, sugar, jelly, and other sweets. Carpenter ants DO NOT eat wood. They remove wood as they create galleries and tunnels for nesting.

Most foraging is done at night between sunset and midnight during spring and summer months. Sometimes workers travel up to 100 yards from a nest in search of food. It is during this search that they may get into houses by searching along the foundation or along a tree branch that is touching the roof. Carpenter ants also interact with our houses when they travel back and forth between their main nest, which must be persistently damp and thus is usually outdoors, and their satellite nests, which may be on the outside surfaces of houses (porches, decks, etc.) or may be in walls, doors or other hollow spaces indoors (see explanation below).

Where they live

There are two types of carpenter ant nests: parent colonies and satellite colonies. Parent colonies are typically established outdoors in moist wood including rotting trees, tree roots, tree stumps, and logs or boards lying on or buried in the ground. They may also nest in moist or decayed wood inside buildings. Wood decay may be caused by exposure to water leaks, condensation, or poor air circulation. Nests have been found behind bathroom tiles; around tubs, sinks, showers, and dishwashers; under roofing, in attic beams, and under subfloor insulation; and in hollow spaces such as doors, curtain rods, and wall voids. Areas around windows and where wood parts touch the foundation may be prone to infestation. Carpenter ants may also nest in foam insulation.

Parent carpenter ant colonies sometimes establish one or more satellite nests in nearby indoor or outdoor sites. Satellite nests are typically composed of workers, pupae, and mature larvae. A satellite nest with less moisture may only support workers (the eggs would dry out in lower humidity). For this reason, satellite nests can be found in relatively dry locations, such as insulation, hollow doors, sound wood, and wall voids. The workers of satellite colonies move readily between their nest and the parent colony. In late summer, winged reproductives (i.e. queens and males) may emerge from pupae transported into satellite colonies. They may appear in structures in late winter and early spring as they swarm from a satellite nest. Carpenter ants may move eggs into satellite nests inside a house or other structure if there is enough moisture.

Damage

Carpenter ants damage wood by excavating and creating galleries and tunnels for their nest. These areas are clean, i.e. they do not contain sawdust or other debris, and are smooth, with a well sanded appearance.

The damage to wood structures is variable. The longer a colony is present in a structure, the greater the damage that can be done. Structural wood can be weakened when carpenter ant damage is severe.

Detection

In order to eliminate carpenter ants nesting indoors, you need to locate and destroy their nest.

The nest may be located by careful observations of worker ants, especially between sunset and midnight during spring and summer months when carpenter ants are most active. To follow carpenter ants without startling them, use a flashlight with a red film over the lens—ants cannot see red light. You can also cover part of the flashlight with your hand so the light is more indirect and is not as bright. You can increase your chances of following workers to their nest by setting out food that is attractive to carpenter ants. Place food in areas where you find workers.

Many foods are attractive to carpenter ants, including honey or other sweet foods. During spring, carpenter ants are particularly attracted to protein sources, such as tuna packed in water. (Carpenter ants are not attracted to tuna packed in oil.) Set out small pieces of tuna for the ants to take back to their nest. It is easier to follow the ants when they are carrying food. With patience and perseverance, you can follow the ants back to their nest. If you put pieces of fish in many areas, food placed closer to the nest or trails will be found sooner.

Other signs that indicate an active nest is nearby include small piles of coarse sawdust or wood shavings, or consistent indoor sightings of large numbers of worker ants, i.e. 20 or more. Also, large numbers of winged ants indoors is evidence of an indoor nest; carpenter ants swarm from late winter through spring. Pay attention to areas where steady moisture is or has been a problem; firewood stored in an attached garage, next to the foundation, along an outside wall, or in a basement; areas around the plumbing or vent entrances; and trees with branches overhanging the house. These are possible entry points and sources of carpenter ant nests.

Sound detection may be helpful in locating a nest. An active colony may make a dry, rustling sound that becomes louder if the colony is disturbed. This sound, thought to be a form of communication, is made with the mandibles (jaws) and is not related to wood chewing. When trying to detect carpenter ants, tap the suspected area and then press an ear to the surface in order to hear any sound. Pest management professionals may use a stethoscope similar to what a medical doctor uses to locate a nest. They may also use a moisture meter to find areas prone to carpenter ants. If one nest is found, watch for evidence of additional nests. More than one nest may be present in a structure..

Prevention

An important method for preventing carpenter ant problems indoors is to eliminate high moisture conditions that are attractive to them. Also, replace any moisture-damaged wood. Be careful to prevent moisture in wood or lumber that is stored in a garage or near the house and, if possible, elevate this wood to allow air circulation.

Store firewood as far away from buildings as possible. Remove tree and shrub stumps and roots. Trim branches that overhang the home so these branches don't contact the house, including roof and eaves. Also, prune branches that touch electrical lines or other wires that are connected to the house; carpenter ants can travel from branches to lines and use them like a highway to buildings.

For more information on eliminating Carpenter Ants give us a call....
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