

Subterranean Termites In Australia

Termites are commonly known as 'white ants'. There are more than 300 species found in Australia but only about 30 could be considered to be pests of timber in service. Of these, the subterranean termites are the most significant, with about 12 species being serious pests.

Termite species



Coptotermes

Coptotermes acinaciformis is found throughout mainland Australia and causes more damage to property than any other species. It is aggressive in its search for food and will attack many items other than wood. It will damage wall lining boards, electrical wiring and even personal possessions. Colonies often nest in trees or stumps but can form nests without ground contact.



Nasutitermes

Nasutitermes exitiosus usually builds a low mound and is more common across southern QLD and NSW but is also found in WA, SA and VIC. *Nasutitermes walkeri* builds part of its colony as an arboreal nest on the branch of a tree; the rest is constructed in the ground beneath it. This genus will mainly attack hardwood such as that found in fences and timber decking.



Mastotermes

Mastotermes darwiniensis, the giant northern termite, is found mainly north of the Tropic of Capricorn. It shows an ability for sub-colonies to split off from the main colony and produce queens, without a mating flight. Eventually a network of interconnecting sub-colonies is established, which makes control difficult. These large termites can devastate buildings, bridges, poles, trees and crops such as sugarcane.



Schedorhinotermes

These termites build fragile nests in old tree stumps, in timber buried in the ground, in filled patios and under fireplaces. The damage they cause is distinctive. Although it can be severe it is often patchy, with huge gouges taken out of sound timber, particularly around nails in floor boards or other timbers. *Schedorhinotermes intermedius* is found in the coastal areas of south QLD and NSW.



Heterotermes

Species of this genus occur throughout Australia. They are generally considered to do most damage to weathered timber in fences, decking and posts. Occasionally they can cause superficial damage to sound timber. They may attack timber at the same time as other species, leading to confusion over which species is causing the main damage.

Life cycle

Termites are social insects and live in colonies containing a number of different castes. Each caste has a different form and function from the others; each is vital to the viability of the colony.



Alates

On a warm, humid evening large numbers of winged male and female termites, the 'alates' or 'primary reproductives', are released by the colony. A small number survive the flight, drop their two pairs of distinctive, equal sized wings, pair off, mate and, if they can find a suitable location, start a new colony.



Queen

As the other castes take over the running of the colony the young queen of most species becomes 'physogastric'. Her abdomen distends to many times its original size and she becomes an egg laying machine, laying up to 1000 eggs a day. She is confined to her royal chamber, tended and fed by the workers and regularly fertilised by the king.



Nursery

The eggs are removed from the royal chamber and transferred to a nursery by the workers. Here the brood (the eggs and nymphs) develops into the other castes that the colony requires for development and survival: workers, soldiers and primary or secondary reproductives.



Soldiers and workers

Soldiers and workers are blind and sterile termites. The workers carry out the work of the colony and are responsible for gathering the food the colony needs. In most species the heads of the soldiers are uniquely armoured and equipped to allow them to defend the colony against attack, notably by ants.

Habits and damage



Termite nest

Termites build a nest that contains the queen and king, the nursery and a large proportion of the soldiers and workers. Some species build a hard-shelled mound above or partly below the ground. Others build their nests in the trunk of a tree or below ground in the root crown. A nest can contain several million termites.



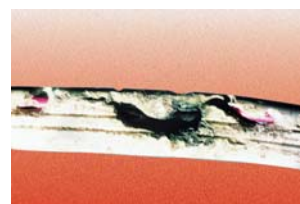
Termite leads

Termites are prone to desiccation. All the significant species that attack buildings construct a system of sealed leads that connect the nest to the food sources. Termites can move safely from the nest to the food and back, in an environment that will protect them against atmospheric conditions, predators and even pesticides.



Damage to timber and other materials

Timber is the main source of cellulose sought by the commercially important species. Sometimes other non-cellulose materials are damaged because they are close to feeding activity. Electrical wiring, switches and plug fittings are often attacked and severely damaged by termites. When natural food supplies such as trees run out, the termites will turn to timber in service. Using covered mud tunnels to link the food supply to the nest, termites will work in timbers that are hidden in floor, wall or ceiling spaces and the damage is often not discovered until structural failure takes place or the termites reveal themselves in some way. Termites can cause extensive damage and more than one colony may attack a building at the same time.



In order to minimise the extent of termite damage it is recommended that regular inspections be carried out by a competent and experienced termite inspector.



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