

Rapacious Raspberry ants march north

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Raspberry crazy ant. Image: Texas A&M

Poor Texas. First it was killer bees, then fire ants. Now, it's the Raspberry ants.

The invasion of this new species of ants has scientists intrigued, businesses concerned and fire ants running for the hills, said Jerry Cook, an entomologist at Sam Houston State University.

Cook and other scientists are at a loss to explain the fast and furious spread of the rapacious ant, which is named after exterminator Tom Rasberry, who discovered the ant in 2002.

The bug was discovered in Houston in 2002 and has quickly spread as far north as Louisiana and Mississippi within the last year.

"This is a species that we do not know much about. Presumably the ant

came from the Caribbean through the Port of Houston," Cook said. "We know the ant is in the *Paratrechina* genus and is capable of growing a population of billions and they need to eat. They especially like other bugs, like fire ants and honey bees."

The population is growing so fast, and so large, that it is potentially an ecosystem disaster, according to Cook.

"If the Raspberry ant can virtually eliminate a pain like the fire ant, what else is it capable of doing?" he said. "If bees are eliminated, plants will not be pollinated which could result to the lack of crops producing fruits and vegetables. That in turn becomes a major problem for the agriculture community. They could become more than a nuisance, they could become a danger."

The Raspberry ant does not have a stinger and therefore cannot inject venom into a person's body; however, it does have formic acid, which creates an irritant reaction rather than a painful poison reaction.

"The bite of the Raspberry ant is far less painful than a fire ant's. Essentially you can get covered with them, and it might freak you out," Cook said.

The population of the Raspberry ant is constantly growing and scientists have not yet discovered a way to eliminate them.

"Without research, we won't discover a solution, and without proper funding we're not likely to get much research," Cook said.

With a research grant, government or otherwise, scientists could reach out to the community to include industries, such as pest control, to develop products and strategies that could control or even eliminate them.

Insecticides will reduce the population and remove them for about a week, but there is no known treatment that would eliminate them for good.

"If we would have had those grants a year ago, we may have been able to start a program that would have eliminated them but now it is probably beyond that point," Cook said.

"Until then, we need to learn how to live with them because the Raspberry, like the fire ant, is here to stay."

Source: Sam Houston State University

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