

City of New Orleans Mosquito & Termite Control Board

Subterranean Termites: Identification and Prevention

Kenneth S. Brown and Claudia Riegel
City of New Orleans Mosquito & Termite Control Board



CITY OF NEW ORLEANS



Figure 1. The most common castes in a termite colony are the soldier (left) and worker (right). Soldiers primarily function to defend the colony from invaders while workers actively forage for food.

Termites play an important role as nature's recyclers of woody materials (i.e. stumps, roots, thatch). Conflict arises when termites locate and feed on wooden materials of economic importance such as homes, schools, and fences. Tens of millions of dollars are spent annually by homeowners and business owners in the City of New Orleans for the prevention and control of subterranean termites and the repair of damage they cause. It is important for residents to be able to readily distinguish termites from other common insects, to recognize signs of a termite infestation and/or damage, and to identify and remedy specific conditions that may increase the likelihood of termite infestations.

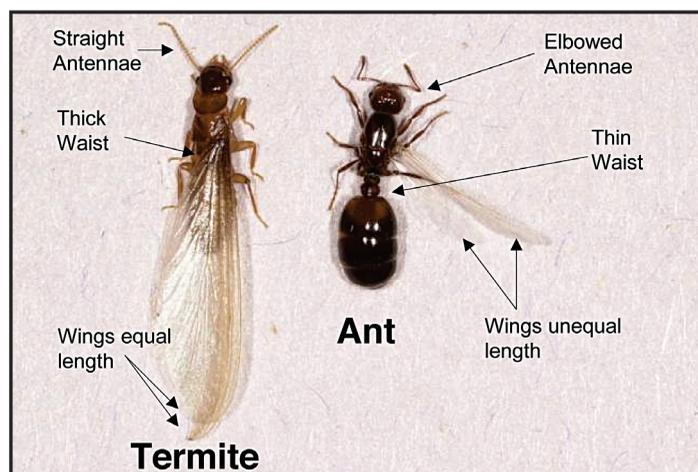


Figure 2. The termite swarmer (left) can be readily distinguished from the winged ant (right) by the shape of the antennae and waist and the length of the wings.

Identification

Termites are social insects that live in colonies consisting of a complex and highly regulated caste system. The most common castes are the worker and soldier castes (Figure 1). These castes rarely leave the protection of their network of earthen nests and shelter tubes so they are rarely seen by homeowners. The winged reproductive, often called alates or swarmers, is the caste that is most commonly encountered by people during seasonal dispersal flights. Termite swarmers can easily be confused with winged ants. It is important to recognize the differences between these two similar insects. There are three features which can be used to quickly differentiate between the two insects (Figure 2). These are the antennae, the constriction between the thorax and abdomen ("waist"), and the length of the wings. Termite swarmers have relatively straight antennae while winged ants have bent or "elbowed" antennae. The constriction between the thorax and abdomen on an ant is narrow while the division between the thorax and abdomen on a termite may not be readily distinguishable. Finally, termites have four wings (two pair) which are equal in length compared with the ant whose hind pair of wings are noticeably smaller than the first pair.

For questions or to request a copy of a termite identification guide please contact:

Kenneth S. Brown, Ph.D.
Research Entomologist
New Orleans Mosquito and Termite Control Board
(504) 658-2400 or ksbrown@cityofno.com

Claudia Riegel, Ph.D.
Assistant Director
New Orleans Mosquito and Termite Control Board
(504) 658-2400 or criegel@cityofno.com

Doc. NOMTCB 3-2007

Damage and Prevention

Termites construct shelter (“mud”) tubes from a mixture of soil, frass (feces), saliva, and cellulose for protection as they actively search for sources of food (Figure 3). These tubes are often the only visible sign of a termite infestation. Once a food source has been located, termites preferentially feed on softer parts of the wood, avoiding the hard wood along the grain. This results in a typical “splintering” of the wood as seen in Figure 4. Also, a thin outer layer of wood is commonly left, giving the wood the appearance of being sound.

Termites require moisture, food (wood), and shelter to survive and thrive. Eliminating sources of each from areas immediately surrounding your structure will reduce the likelihood of termite damage to your property. For example, mulch which rests against the foundation of a structure and that is watered regularly provides all three environmental requirements and invites termite problems.



Figure 3. Subterranean termite shelter tube running from the ground to the structure along a support pier. (above)



Figure 4. Formosan subterranean termite damage to structural timber. A sharp instrument such as an ice pick or screwdriver can be used to test the structural integrity of window sills, baseboards, and other wooden members. (left)

Figure 5. Formosan subterranean termite damage to treated wood used for landscaping. This is a common way termites are transported from one location to another. (below)

9 Steps that can be taken to reduce your home’s risk of a termite infestation

1. Eliminate wood to ground contact near or under your house by removing stumps, debris, stakes, and form boards.
2. Never store firewood or lumber next to the house.
3. Trim plants, trees, and shrubs to avoid contact with the structure and remove plants growing on walls
4. Avoid using landscape timbers or railroad crossties in the yard (Figure 5).
5. Maintain clean gutters and downspouts to prevent water from accumulating next to your house. Install downspout extensions, French drains, or drain tiles to divert water from the structure.
6. Ensure that the external grade of the property slopes away from the house and does not cover the brick veneer, siding, or stucco.
7. Divert lawn sprinklers away from the structure.
8. Promptly repair leaky faucets and roofing and divert air conditioner condensation drains away from the structure.
9. Maintain a subterranean termite contract on your building with a licensed pest control company.

