

COLUMNISTS

Can you tell good ants from bad ants?

Randy Deming Special to the Reporter-News

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I like to take my 6-year-old grandson for walks on my acreage in Callahan County, but I am always afraid he will stop in the middle of a fire ant bed. Consequently, I have spent some time showing him how to identify and avoid invasive fire ants, *Solenopsis invicta*.

I explained that fire ant beds have a mound of soft soil and do not have a central opening. When the nest is disturbed, thousands of ants react aggressively, crawling up the legs of their victim and stinging all at once.

My grandson likes to call these ants “the bad ants!”

The other species of ant that is common on my property is the Red Harvester ant, *Pogonomyrmex barbatus*. These are fairly large for ants, reddish brown and have squarish heads. They are easily identified by their large, flat circular nest mounds, which are cleared of vegetation around their entrance hole.

Trails extend in various directions from the main mound, leading to different foraging zones that are within 130 feet of the entrance. These ants also sting, but their nests are easy to see and they are not as aggressive as fire ants.

My grandson likes to call these ants “the good ants.”

He is right. These ants are beneficial even though they have one of the most painful stings in the animal world. In fact, Rob Alleva and Adam Thorn, of the “Kings of Pain” TV show, put their hands in a tank of red harvester ants, and reported these ants as having one of the most potent stings in the animal world. It is comforting to note that in their demonstration, the harvester ants took a lot of provoking before they started to sting. Even good ants need to be respected.

Native red harvester ants are “good ants” for several reasons. First of all, these ants are the principal food of the threatened Texas Horned Lizard. Horned lizards are in trouble because there are fewer red harvester ants.

Harvester ants are also beneficial because they improve soils as their deep intricate tunnels aerate the soil, and they help with the dispersal of seeds, their primary food source.

Harvester ant colonies can have as many as 10,000 ants, which are all females. It is a bearded ant, but unlike humans it is the females that have beards. The beards are psamaphores which are used by worker females to carry grass seeds.

The worker female lives for about a year and can carry out different functions as she ages. The different jobs are nest maintenance worker, midden worker for trash removal, forager and patroller.

A colony will produce queens and males after about five years. Males live only to mate and die. It is believed that only one queen in a thousand will establish a successful colony. Those that succeed will live for 15-20 years.

Red harvester ants are in decline. They are not considered to be pests for agriculture or homes, but the indiscriminate use of insecticides is believed to be a contributing factor. They are also being diminished by the invasive fire ant. Fire ants do not harm them directly, but it is believed they compete for food sources, effectively starving the harvester ants.

One of the keys to establishing healthy colonies is the implementation of effective controls against invasive fire ants. Texas Parks and Wildlife recently published an article recommending the use of ant baits with "Spinosad" to control fire ants. Spinosad kills fire ants but does not harm red harvester ants. It is made from a soil bacterium and found in the active ingredients of several insecticide products. Be sure to follow directions carefully to prevent harm to beneficial insects.

Red harvester ants are the "good ants." A lot of people, in their zeal to be rid of fire ants, have declared war on all ant species by using pesticides that do not discriminate between good ants and bad. Care needs to be taken to protect native ant species that help us. If my 6-year-old grandson can tell the difference, so can we.

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