

Red Harvester Ants: A Lesson About Man and Nature.

The following is adapted from an article written by my wife, Priscilla, for our Master Naturalist newsletter.

The Red Harvester Ant (*Pogonomyrmex baratus*) is found in the Hill Country in many habitats, but usually in open, dry areas. These ants are, as the name implies, red, and relatively large. Their bodies range from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch long, which makes them about 3 to 4 times as large as a fire ant. While they can sting and the sting can be painful, they are not aggressive and they seldom sting unless harmed. They do not invade houses or other buildings.

They are most easily identified in natural areas by their nest which is usually a circular area 1 to 4 feet in diameter, bare of any vegetation, with a single hole in the middle. They do not generally make mounds. Their harvesting trails may radiate out from the central circle and may be obvious for some distance. Their main food sources are grass and forb seeds, but they also eat dead insects. They find their food by foraging many yards from their nest and then carry it back to the nest. As the accompanying photo shows, they can be quite ambitious in terms of the size of insects they will try to bring back. Often several workers cooperate to move large insects.

Even though we spend a lot of time outdoors working in our yard, digging here and there, tromping through tall grass etc., we have never been stung by a harvester ant. We have occasionally had one crawl on us. We can't say the same about fire ants.

We have inadvertently added another food source for these ants in our yard. We find that they are also fond of the sugar solution dripping from the hummingbird feeders onto the concrete porch as the day warms. The ants make a perfect circle around a sugar-solution puddle, ant touching ant, as they suck up the sugar solution either as a meal or to take to their nest to share.

Harvester ants are not as common as they once were, and the decline in their numbers is believed to be mainly responsible for the decline in the numbers of Texas horned lizards (horny toads), because the red harvester ants are the primary food of the lizard.

Many folks ascribe the decline in the number of harvester ants to the advance of imported fire ants, but, as is usual in nature, it's more complicated than that. Both harvester ants and horny toads have declined even in areas with few if any fire ants. Loss of habitat from development and farming is certainly part of the cause. Insecticides used in farming as well as poisoning for fire ants is certainly also part of the reason for the decline of harvester ants as none of these baits or poisons are selective. Imported fire ants may compete somewhat with harvester ants for food, but the former consume less seeds and more insects (ticks, chiggers, caterpillars) than the latter.

We have found that we do not need any pesticides in our gardens or yard. Left to her own devices, Mother Nature does a good job of keeping things in balance. The insects

and our native plants have co-evolved and co-existed successfully for eons before we all came here. Before you use insecticides to kill fire ants, you might reflect on the peaceful nature and interesting behavior of red harvester ants, and how easy it is to unintentionally do them in with pesticides for fire ants and other insects.

This all illustrates how easy it is for man's activities to alter the native environment and how these activities may have consequences beyond what was intended. I have never known a native Texan who didn't like horny toads. Most of us miss them. But I have known lots of folks who go to war against imported fire ants, and many who are equally aggressive in eliminating all other ants.

It is of course man who introduced (accidentally) the imported fire ants into this country, and his reaction to them that is at least partially responsible for declining harvester ant populations and thus the horned lizard population. Everything in Nature is connected to everything else. It is just that man has not yet learned how to live with Nature without damaging it.

For more information go to <http://insects.tamu.edu/fieldguide/cimg361.html> and http://urbanentomology.tamu.edu/ants/red_harvester.html

Until next time...

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