

# Termites

## Status

- Structural Pest
- No health threat



Western Subterranean Termites  
*Reticulitermes hesperus*

## Introduction

Termites are small soft-bodied insects with large heads and pear-shaped bodies. All species are social and live in colonies that may host thousands of individuals. They feed on dead wood or fungi; the colony is either housed in dead wood or in soil. They are important as food for many other animals, their tunnels serve to aerate soil which aids plant growth, and their wood-eating is part of the natural decomposition process that returns nutrients to soil. Unfortunately, they also feed on wood that makes up our homes and other buildings. There are about 2,800 known species of termites in the world, 44 in North America, and 15 in California.

Most termites that you might encounter are pale, soft-bodied workers, which are often mistaken for ants, sometimes nicknamed “white ants.” Termites have a broad connection between thorax and abdomen (“waist”); ants have a very narrow “waist.” The antennae of termites is thread-like and made up of tiny bead-like segments; antennae of ants is elbowed and made up of cylindrical segments. The reproductive stages of both termites and ants have four membranous wings, however all four wings of termites are nearly identical and very long, while the front wings of ants are larger than the hind wings.

## Swarming

During certain times of year and weather conditions, particularly after rainfall followed by warm weather, young reproductive termites exit the colony and fly away in search of a partner. This mass exodus may consist of dozens to hundreds of individuals, all flying away from their parent’s colony together. Birds such as phoebes, kingbirds, and other flycatchers are very fond of termites and are seen performing comical acrobatics to catch and devour them out of the air.

## Body Forms and Reproduction

Termites have four body forms (castes) that have different functions within the colony. Workers are cream-colored sterile males and females that never grow wings. They perform the day-to-day work of the colony: chew wood, make tunnels, maintain the nest, tend the young, and feed other termites. Soldiers are sterile males and females that have enlarged hardened heads, often equipped with large mandibles for defending the colony. Reproductives are usually tan to dark brown and have functional wings. Both male and female forms are fertile. When mature, they fly from their parent’s colony, locate a partner, find a secluded place, drop their wings, mate, and start their own colony. A mated female is called a queen, a mated male is a king. The pair produces offspring that develop to become members of their colony. Since the colony is made up of descendants of a single pair of termites, it is a family unit. Some colonies are made up of multiple pairs of reproductives, making those colonies multi-family units. Subreproductives resemble reproductives but have only wing stubs and can never fly. They are essentially sterile but if the king and/or queen die or are removed from the colony, they become fertile and can reproduce. They are then called a secondary king or queen. The original (primary) queen of some species is known to lay up to 2,000 eggs per day and live up to 45 years.

## Management

Since termites can damage wood and wood products, care should be taken to prevent them from colonizing structures. Most termite inspection and control should be carried out by a licensed professional pest control company. However, there are some things that homeowners can do to discourage termite infestation and reduce their impact.

- Termites enter small cracks and holes in wood to start a new colony. Seal up cracks and holes in buildings to prevent their entry.
- Watch for swarms of termites flying from their colonies in soil or wood. The exit point reveals the location of the colony.
- Routinely inspect buildings for termite colonies and damage. As they produce and accumulate solid waste (“fecal pellets”), termite workers make holes to the outside and push the pellets out. Look for accumulation of fecal pellets at the base of posts and on the ground.
- As termites feed and hollow out wood, a tap on the wood will sound hollow and may crush inward, revealing the colony’s tunnels. Tap suspect wood and listen for the sound.
- Termites often invade firewood piles, especially those stored directly on soil. Stack firewood on a stand to keep the wood at least 18 inches above the ground.

