

New Ant found in Chase County

Written by Wauneta Breeze
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By Robert Tigner

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An interesting new ant has been found near Smith Harvester's at Champion. It is the western Thatch ant (WTA). Last week phone calls came into the UNL Chase County Extension office about several mounds along a tree line and red ants. After obtaining samples of the ants, they were identified.

The western thatch ant is sometimes confused with the fire ant since they look similar, without a microscope. Fire ants fortunately cannot survive the Nebraska winters. But the WTA is better adapted to western Nebraska. While fire ants aren't good to have around, the WTA is useful.

The WTA builds mounds from nearby plants. The plant material is either dead material or the WTA will also gnaw material off nearby plants. Mounds can be as tall as 2 feet and up to 3 feet in diameter. The mound is protecting the colony underground which could be up to 3 feet deep. The mound functions as a way to control both the temperature and humidity of the colony.

WTA is a bi-colored ant with a red head and thorax and a black abdomen. The WTA fits into western Nebraska since it herds livestock, aphids. Aphids produce honeydew which is a main food ingredient for WTA. Because they herd aphids, WTA protects them from their predators, beetles and wasps as well as others.

WTA can be confused with both carpenter ants and fire ants. The differences between the three ants are easier to see under a microscope. WTA has a thoracic notch but carpenter ants do not. Fire ants are dark red and have an abdomen which dark red unlike the black abdomen of the WTA. Fire ants are not adapted to cold weather and have only reached as far north as the southern borders of Oklahoma and Arkansas. WTA will bite when threatened, but fire ants are

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aggressive. The WTA bite will irritate but not as severely as the sting of a fire ant.