

Termite

Amitermes subterranean termites



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Species of *Amitermes* are true subterranean termites. Their tunnels are entirely underground and penetrate into wood where they excavate irregular galleries. On some occasions they will construct shelter tubes to bridge short gaps. They are found throughout southern, central and western Texas.

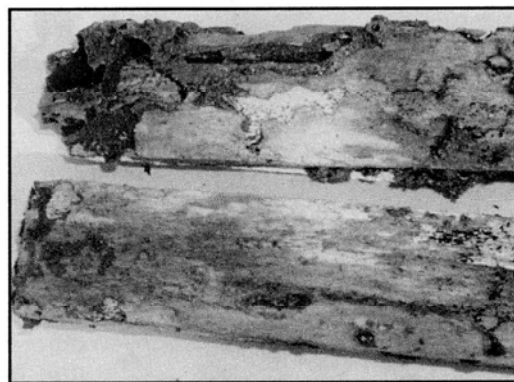
Amitermes subterranean termites are related to surface-feeding termites (also in the family Termitidae. See column from TPCA, April-May issue) but have very different habits. Except for their presence in arid and semi-arid regions their biology is more similar to that of pests such as *Reticulitermes* than to their close relatives.

These species are definitely not restricted to deserts. They are found along the coast south and west of Houston, up the Interstate 35 corridor at least as far as Temple, and westwards to California. Their native habitats include oak woodlands, brush, grasslands, and true desert. In addition, they are abundant in the vicinity of structures throughout their ranges, even in yards with well kept lawns in heavily urbanized areas.

Three species are known from Texas. In my experience, *Amitermes wheeleri* (Desneux) is the most abundant in urban, residential settings and the most tolerant of landscaping. *Amitermes minimus* Light, a smaller species, is often found in drier settings (less irrigation). *Amitermes emersoni* Light is only known from far West Texas. These species coexist with *Reticulitermes flavipes* in southern and Central Texas or *R. tibialis* in western Texas.

A sample of feeding damage is shown. The feeding bears a strong resemblance to that of *Reticulitermes* species. *Amitermes*

feeding is somewhat like that of drywood termites, in that they tunnel across wood grain and growth rings and do not “delaminate” the wood. Tunnels are usually very speckled from feces and often are stained black by mold or fungal growth which does not appear to deter feeding. There may be some preference for softer, partially decayed wood. These differences are subjective, but with experience damage can be distinguished from that of native subs with a fair to high degree of confidence.



Even though abundant, these termites are little known. When seen, they are either mistaken for surface-feeding termites (physical similarity) or native subs (habits). They have mostly been ignored in the pest control literature because of the restricted geographic distributions and historically low populations within their range. This may change because of rapid development, especially in the El Paso area and the Austin-San Antonio corridor.

Despite their habits, they seem to have little pest potential. Their foraging is apparently much less aggressive than that of native subs. Their apparent preference for softer, partially decayed wood, may also be a factor here. *Amitermes wheeleri* and *A. minimus* have been collected inside struc-

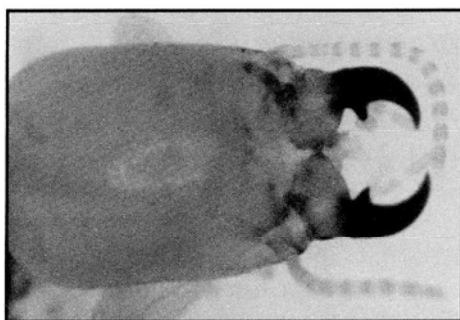
tures on several occasions, usually in cases of unusual construction methods such as adobe.

A closely related species from central Florida, *Amitermes floridensis*, is easily controlled by spot treatments near points of entry. Under circumstances where I have encountered them, more complete termiticide treatments are usually not justified. It is very important to properly identify the species that is actually infesting the structure.

Identification

Workers are noticeably smaller than those of most native subterranean termites (*Reticulitermes*). They have a noticeably plump abdomen. Gut contents are usually black or gray, regardless of what they are eating. They resemble small surface-feeding termites (*Gnathamitermes* species) but are smaller and less plump. With practice they are easily recognized.

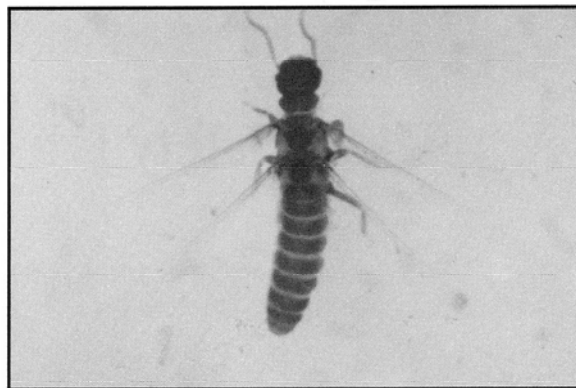
Soldier heads appear rounded and the mandibles are generally short, depending on species. All species have prominent teeth on the inside of the mandibles, as well as the typical hooked tips. The 3 species differ in small details of the mandibles. Soldiers of surface-feeding termites have much longer mandibles, often as long as the head.



Alates are slightly smaller than those of *Reticulitermes flavipes* and much smaller than those of

Gnathamitermes species. The body is entirely black and the wings have a blackish cast. Alates normally swarm in mid to late summer during daylight hours or early evening. Large swarms are sometimes seen after or during summer rains.

Tom Atkinson lives in Austin and is a field research biologist for Dow AgroSciences specializing in urban pests in Texas and adjacent states.



All photos, *Amitermes wheeleri*, by author

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