

# Tree-Dwelling Termite

## a Potential Threat to South Florida

**Overview:** A new, non-native species of termite, "*Nasutitermes costalis*", was discovered in Broward County in May of 2001. Native to the Caribbean, this insect pest most likely arrived in Florida as a ship-borne infestation. The local infestation now covers approximately 50 acres with nests generally being found at the bases of both dead and live trees. Depending upon the age of the colony and number of individuals, nests can range from 6 to 36 inches in diameter. According to University of Florida termite expert Dr. Rudolf Scheffrahn, "this tree-dwelling species of termite may have taken as much as eight years to establish itself before it was detected." At this point, he adds, "it appears that the termite has spread to adjacent properties in the area". To find out how widespread the problem is, University of Florida - IFAS researchers are seeking permission to inspect neighboring properties.



**Identification:** *Nasutitermes costalis* are somewhat ant-like in appearance, and therefore sometimes mistaken for ants. The soldiers are dark-brown to blackish in color and have a conical shaped head from which a defensive, turpentine-like secretion can be emitted to repel predators.



*N. costalis* soldier



*N. costalis* swarmer

The swarmer (winged reproductive-stage individuals) have dark brown bodies and blackish wings, and look much different than other termite species present in South Florida.

Unlike subterranean termites, *Nasutitermes costalis* searches for food at or above ground level and can build its nests either on the ground, in trees, or in wooden structures. This makes detection of an infestation somewhat easier than with other species of termites.



Ground nest with foraging tubes

Look for dark brown foraging tubes radiating out from similarly colored sponge-like nests. Typically, foraging tubes lead to feeding sites such as deadwood in trees or untreated wood found in buildings, boats and storage areas (wooden pallets, ladders, tool handles etc.). Like other termite species in Florida, *Nasutitermes costalis* has seasonal flight activity that serves to disperse the population and spread the infestation. Swarming, the initiation of new colonies, has been observed at the infested site during late May and June, coincident with the start of the rainy season.



Foraging tubes on house

**Damage:** According to Dr. Scheffrahn, *Nasutitermes costalis* is not as destructive as the Formosan subterranean termite now spreading throughout the southeastern United States. However, it is still capable



**Damaged wooden pallet**

of causing widespread damage to aboveground structures. Dr. Scheffrahn also notes that this tropical termite could spread as far north as Orlando and Tampa.



**Interior infestation**

**Control:** Work on chemical control is underway. Already, Dr. Scheffrahn's work suggests that this new species of termite does not respond well to chemical baits. He indicated that more research is needed to confirm this and to develop other control methods." Unfortunately, as with most exotic, non-agricultural pests, there are no federal, state or local guidelines to implement a quarantine or control program. He strongly suggests that residents who suspect their property may be infested with *Nasutitermes costalis* should contact a licensed, professional pest control operator as soon as possible.



**Exterior treatment of  
*N. costalis***

Prepared by: Michael Orfanedes, Ph.D., Extension Agent, Charles Livio, Program Assistant, and Sandra Granson, Horticulture Technician, Broward County Extension Education Division, University of Florida - IFAS

Photos courtesy of Dr. Rudolph Scheffrahn, professor of entomology at the University of Florida – IFAS, Ft. Lauderdale Research & Education Center



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**Broward County Community Services Department  
Broward County Extension Education Division  
3245 College Avenue, Davie, FL 33314**

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**For more information, please contact the Florida Department of  
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