

Fire ant is little, but can cause big trouble AS with many pests, Mauians can help to keep it off our land



The “**little fire ant**” is established on the Big Island but has not been found yet on Maui. Shown greatly enlarged here, it is about 2 millimeters in size, about the size of a pinhead. *Photo by April Noble*

This is the head of the speck-sized little fire ant.

Kia‘i Moku

By Joylynn Paman



When was the last time you were interrupted during your meal,

only to return to a plate full of ants? Ants are so common in Hawai`i that you would assume they are native, but that’s not so. No ant species are native to Hawai`i. Whether they hitched a ride on a plant or came with a shipment of furniture, these tiny insects have made their way to our islands with the unintentional help of humans.

Among the pest ants that have not yet been discovered on the island of Maui are two species, both of which are referred to as “fire ants.”

One species, the “red imported fire ant” (*Solenopsis invicta*), has been spreading across the continental United States since the 1930s but has not yet been discovered in Hawai`i. Many people believe that the red imported fire ant is very likely to become the next severe pest invasion in Hawai`i unless dramatic steps are taken to prevent its arrival and establishment.

The other, the “little fire ant” (*Wasmannia auropunctata*), is established on

the island of Hawai`i but has not yet been found on Maui. The little fire ant is a very slow moving ant, the size of an exclamation point (2 mm).

This species gets its name from its powerful sting that can feel firelike to the person or animal on the receiving end of the sting. Most people will develop large red welts that last hours, even days, followed by an intense itching sensation. An individual ant can deliver multiple stings, and often several ants attack at once.

Little fire ants were first discovered on the Big Island in 1999. There, they spread throughout the eastern side, causing economic and environmental harm and impacting the quality of life for Big Island residents and visitors. The speck-sized ant invades agricultural areas and nurseries putting coffee growers and flower pickers at risk of being stung. Many farm owners have had difficulties keeping workers who fear the fire ant bite.

Fire ants will find their way into the nooks and crannies of potted plants, flowers, clumps of grass, and leaf litter. To the dismay of many residents, little fire ants also enter Big Island homes getting into clothes, beds, furniture and food. Babies laying in cribs are vulnerable to the little fire ant.

Besides being a serious

nuisance to humans, this ant from Central and South America can make its mark on animals and ecosystems too. In the Galapagos Islands, little fire ants dramatically reduced the highly endangered Galapagos tortoise population. The ants make their way to the tortoises’ eyes and reproductive organs damaging their vision and leaving them unable to reproduce.

Here on Maui, will our nesting population of endangered hawksbill sea turtles be at risk?

Little fire ants are also known to attack the eyes of domestic animals and blind them. They can impact native insects by preying on them and competing for food. Coastal native bird eggs and hatchling populations would be at risk from these invaders as well.

Fortunately for Maui County residents and visitors, little fire ants have not been reported here, but there is always the possibility that they could catch a free ride via plants imported from the Big Island or mainland.

You can help prevent the introduction of this pest. Before purchasing a plant or transporting it, inspect it for ants and other pests. Purchase plants from nurseries and landscapers who keep their stock free of pests.

Help survey for little fire ants. Smear a chopstick with a thick coat of

peanut butter and leave it in your yard until it attracts ants. Place the chopstick in a Ziplock and freeze it overnight. Then inspect the ants. Are they orange in color and the size of a pinhead (2 mm)? If so, you should send your sample in to the Hawai`i Dept. of Agriculture for identification.

However, there are a few look-alikes that you should be aware of and pictures can be found at <http://www.hear.org/alienspeciesinhawaii/ants/index.html>.

Don’t confuse this slow moving ant with the tropical fire ant which is much larger and moves frantically. Little fire ants are much smaller than the common tropical fire ant.

By staying abreast with the latest pest species that are knocking on our doorstep, we can help prevent their introduction into Maui County and feel a little more at ease the next time a meal is shared with the ants!

• Joylynn Paman, is the public relations and education specialist for the Maui Invasive Species Committee. “Kia‘i Moku” (or “Guarding the Island”) is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island’s environment, economy and quality of life.