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Insect Life: *Invasion* of the Red Imported Fire Ant (Hymenoptera: Formicidae) FREE

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Abstract

The red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* Buren, hereafter referred to as the *imported fire ant*, has received much press coverage since its introduction into the United States approximately 75 years ago. This is not because of its fascinating biology, which I will cover, but to the fear and frustration of citizens who have come in contact with this insect. The news media have recognized the public's frustration and, while providing important information, have tended to exaggerate and fan the fires of frustration and fear. Following the United States Department of Agriculture's recognition that imported fire ants were a problem in 1950, many newspaper headlines have appeared that have given the impression that not only are these ants dangerous, they are marching across the South and will soon invade your area. Some of the more sensational ones include, "Possibly lethal hordes of fire ants plague sadden Texas areas" (*Washington Post*, 30 October 1981); "But insects 'are winning': officials fighting to check fire ants march through Texas" (*Los Angeles Times*, 5 December 1981); "War on fire ants still suffers stinging losses" (*Chicago Tribune*, 13 June 1982); and "Woman puts up tough fight before dying from fire ant stings" (*Houston Chronicle*, 23 November 1990). Further, pictures like the cover of *The Magazine of San Antonio* (May 1980) taken from a poster advertising the movie *Empire of the Ants* (American International Pictures 1977) or the paperback book, *The Fire Ants* (Wernick 1976) suggest these ants are at least the size of a squirrel, not unlike the ants featured in the movie *Them* (Warner Brothers 1954). The ants are the subject of many magazine articles (Michel 1984, Glass-Godwin 1992, Killion and Vinson 1995). Imported fire ants also have received magazine cover status in such publications as *Smithsonian* (July 1990) and *Texas Monthly Magazine* (August 1988). They even have entered our popular culture as indicated by their inclusion in several cartoons such as *Bloom County*

(Breathed 1981) or *Mother Goose and Grimm* (Peter 1989). However, the cover of *Texas Monthly Magazine* probably stated best what most people in the infested region consider this creature, (i.e., “Public Enemy Number One”). But, is this designation deserved? To examine this question I first will cover the fire ant's biology and then some of the problems.

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