



Little fire ant *Wasmannia auropunctata* Hymenoptera: Formicidae (Roger) is now established in New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna islands, Tahiti, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

Its range is expanding rapidly through the Pacific islands due to its ability to hitch hike undetected on a large range of commodities transported via air or sea. It is also established in Tropical and subtropical areas in West Africa; Hawaii, Florida, California, Bermuda, Bahamas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. It is a greenhouse pest in temperate regions such as England and Canada.

Common name(s): little fire ant, electric ant, little red fire ant, little introduced fire ant, small fire ant, West Indian stinging ant, cocotree ant (English); fourmi rouge, petit fourmi de feu, formi électrique (French-New Caledonia).

These tiny (1-1.5mm) reddish to golden brown ants can quickly dominate a wide range of environments to the exclusion of all other invertebrates, except honey dew producing insects which it will farm. Domination is achieved by the vast numbers of foragers using all horizontal and vertical niches to forage and set up temporary nests. They will readily invade peoples' houses and yards, horticultural crops and forested areas. Foragers are slow moving relative to many ants and can form trails extending many metres going to and from food sources. *W. auropunctata* is a generalist feeder on invertebrates, seeds, other plant material, and a large portion of its diet appears to consist of honeydew collected from Homoptera, which gives rise to the populations of agricultural pests such as mealybugs, scale insects, whiteflies and other soft insects.

It is not aggressive compared with some other ant species but will sting when provoked or threatened. Often stings are the result of the ants being trapped between peoples' clothing and skin. The sting can be painful and can cause blindness in pets and livestock that are repeatedly exposed to stings.



Photo: Eric Loeve

Little fire ant Wasmannia auropunctata: side view (top photo), head (above, upper right) and over head view (above, lower right)

Photo source: www.padil.gov.au

Control can only be effectively achieved by use of appropriate attractant ant baits. Sprays, powders or drenches will be largely ineffective. There are no biological control options currently available for this ant. Eradication appears to have been achieved from a small (21ha) infestation on the Marchena Island in the Galapagos Archipelago, but only after significant effort and expenditure. Regular surveillance and early detection is critical to be able to consider eradication as a management option.

Two methods of dispersal have combined and helped the spread of *W. auropunctata* at local, regional, national and international scales: accidental human assisted dispersal and budding. Dispersal by humans is most significant, without which the ant may never have reached its current locations. It will happily hitch hike on wide range of commodities including personal luggage, but is most likely associated with any plant material and fruit.

Where people are not responsible for spreading the ants, introduced populations of *W. auropunctata* are also believed to spread predominantly through budding. That is, they will simply walk out of the maternal nest and set up there own nest a short distance away. Through this method it is thought they can spread up to 500m. Some spread on floating vegetation/debris (particularly logs) during floods is also likely.