

## **Making Ripples**

### **Coping with Fire Ants in Northwest Arkansas**

by Amanda Bancroft

Fire ants are a non-native, invasive species accidentally introduced to the USA via South American soil used in ship ballast around the 1930's, and spread into Arkansas in the 1950's. A threat to humans, agriculture, and ecosystems, fire ants have some benefit to the environment, although it's best to halt their spread and eliminate colonies safely when possible.

As of March 2016, half of Arkansas is under federal quarantine to prevent fire ant spread. Northwest Arkansas and surrounding regions have reported isolated fire ant populations, such as in Washington County in 1998. There is more than one species and color of fire ant in Arkansas, and native ants are often misidentified. Killing native ants makes it easier for fire ants to spread.

Fire ants can both bite and sting multiple times, which is very painful and causes blisters that itch and burn. Severe allergic reactions to their venom are rare. The World Health Organization estimates that, of the 40 million people living in fire ant infested areas in the southeastern United States, 60 percent are stung annually. They don't hibernate; in winter, they're just less active. It takes very cold winters to wipe out colonies. Home remedies may kill a few ants but can cause personal injury and, in some cases, environmental harm.

If you suspect fire ants in your yard, contact your nearest cooperative extension service for identification help and eradication options, including their two-step method. According to extension entomologists Kelly Loftin and John Hopkins, "The two-step method is suggested for areas with a high colony density (over 20 per acre) and low numbers of beneficial native ants. This method can effectively control heavy fire ant infestations when conducted at least twice yearly." It's best to call for details, to ensure appropriate timing and application success.

Besides directly killing a fire ant mound, there are efforts underway to combat fire ants using parasites, pathogens, viruses, competitors and predators. Parasitic flies from the fire ant's native range have been introduced intentionally to the United States so that they can reduce fire ant activity above ground, assisting native ants to better compete with fire ants. Armadillos and other predators eat fire ants.

According to the cooperative extension service, they aren't all bad, and are actually fascinating creatures. A fire ant's diet includes plants, small animals, birds, human foods, and parasites like ticks and chiggers, whose populations may be reduced in fields infested with fire ants. They're quite awesome animals, forming an ant raft that can float for months to find dry ground. Colony size is usually above 200,000 ants. They prey on cotton and sugarcane pests, helping some farmers. Overall, though, fire ants are a nuisance that cost us about \$750 million in damage to crops and machinery, livestock deaths, and other losses.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: [www.RipplesBlog.org](http://www.RipplesBlog.org).