When Your Ant Comes To Visit
Mistaken Identity

(Source: Carson Dunlop Reports)

Carpenter Ants should not be confused with termites. Termites are white in colour and are smaller than a grain of rice. Carpenter ants look like regular black ants, except a little bigger. Adult carpenter ants grow to be as much as one-half inch long. Queens are often twice that size.

If you get really intimate with a carpenter ant you will notice that they have bent or "elbowed" antennae. They only have one Node or bump on the joint between their thorax and abdomen (the thorax is the middle section and the abdomen is the rear section), and the thorax on some carpenter ants is burnt orange or chestnut red in colour. They also have hairy abdomens.
You will never see a termite unless you break open a piece of infested wood or a shelter tube (tunnels that termites use to get from the soil, where they live, to the wood they are eating). Carpenter ants, on the other hand, roam around looking for food the same way ordinary ants do.

Termites eat wood. Carpenter ants do not. Instead, they burrow into wood to make a nest and they push the wood and other debris (called frass) out of their colonies. The inside of the infested wood is spotlessly clean and consists of smooth galleries through the wood.

Finding A Home
Most carpenter ant nests are outdoors in tree stumps, fence posts, and unfortunately, sometimes in porches. But these ants will also nest indoors in rotten or damp wood or sound wood adjacent to a source of moisture such as a sweaty pipe, washing machines, dishwashers or baseboards in damp areas. Although they normally excavate their colonies, they sometimes live in hollow doors, window frames, etc.

Carpenter ants are omnivorous meaning they eat all different types of food. Outdoors they eat plants, insects, (their favorite are aphids), fruit, etc. Indoors they eat household foodstuff, especially syrup, honey, sugar, fat and grease.

On their way back to the colony, they rarely take the same route twice, which can make it difficult to locate the nest. Even though the colony may be indoors, most of the ants will go outdoors to feed. This also reduces the likelihood of detection. To make matters worse, the ants are more active at night than in the daytime and some colonies go dormant during the winter. (The colony is most active during the spring and summer.)

Coming Out of the Closet
In the summer months, swarms of winged carpenter ants (both male and female) leave the colony. They mate on the fly, return to earth and shed their wings. The female (queen) then finds a suitable place to lay her eggs which hatch into larvae. The larvae develop into adults in 2 to 10 months depending on the temperature. These adults are workers and at this stage the colony is only a queen plus 10 to 20 workers. The colony takes 3 to 6 years to develop, during which time the queen lays eggs and the workers care for the young. A queen has a life expectancy of 8 to 12 years while workers can live 4 or 5 years. When the colony has developed, winged males and females form. They remain in the colony over the winter and take flight the next summer to begin the process again.

A developed colony may contain thousands of ants. Needless to say, the damage to wooden components can be significant to make a home for this many ants.

Kissing Your Ants Goodbye

You have to find the colony to get rid of the ants. This can be tricky. Sawdust at entrances to the colony is one method. Listening for the ants is another. At quiet times, a dry rustling sound can be heard from the colony (some specialists use stethoscopes to listen for them). If you bang on the wood, it disturbs them and the noise level from the colony will increase. Finding and eliminating the colony is best left to a pest control specialist.

Your best defense against carpenter ants is elimination of damp environments and rotted wood within the home. Storing firewood adjacent to the house or in the basement is not wise. While chemical treatment can kill the colony, they'll be back next year if suitable conditions exist.