

THEY DON'T
BELONG
TRACKING
INVASIVE
SPECIES

Red Imported Fire Ants

Attacking
Everything



by Meish Goldish

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Red Imported Fire Ants

Attacking Everything



by Meish Goldish

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A Texas Mystery

Small creatures called horned lizards once lived throughout Texas. They roamed the state searching for their favorite food, an **insect** called the harvester ant. Then, in the 1970s, something odd happened. Horned lizards began to disappear from Texas. Scientists were puzzled. What could have caused this?

Horned lizards have spikes all over their bodies to protect themselves from enemies.



Horned lizards need to eat lots of harvester ants (right) to survive.

Eventually, scientists discovered the problem—an **invasive species** called red **imported** fire ants. These insects gobbled up the seeds that harvester ants usually eat. With little food, harvester ants began to vanish. Horned lizards were then left without their main source of food.

In addition, groups of the fierce fire ants sometimes attacked and ate baby horned lizards. As a result, the number of lizards in Texas dropped sharply. Unfortunately, the tiny insects were also causing destruction in many other states.

A red imported fire ant



Red imported fire ants may be reddish brown or black. They are very small—only about $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3.2 mm) long. That's about half the length of a pencil eraser.

Invading America

Red imported fire ants arrived in the United States by accident. How? In the 1930s, ships carrying goods sailed from South America to Mobile, Alabama. Ship workers in South America had loaded soil into the bottoms of the boats to keep them balanced at sea. However, they didn't know that red fire ants were living in the soil.

How Red Imported Fire Ants Reached the United States



Red imported fire ants originally came from Argentina and Brazil, in South America.

During the trip to the United States, the small ants spread all over the boats. When the ships reached Alabama, it didn't take long for the insects to crawl onto the shore. Then they began to build homes.

There are several kinds of fire ants that are **native** to the United States. The word *imported* was added to the name of the fire ants that came from South America.



Red imported fire ant



Southern fire ant

Red imported fire ants look similar to fire ants that are native to the United States, such as the Southern fire ant.

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About the Author

Meish Goldish has written more than 200 books for children. His book *Surf Dog Miracles* was a Children's Choices Selection in 2014. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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Red Imported Fire Ants

Attacking Everything

Red imported fire ants are on the attack in the United States. The tiny insects came to Alabama in the 1930s when they hitched a ride on ships sailing from South America. After the ants arrived in their new home, they began building huge colonies. The fierce little creatures soon spread throughout the South, biting and stinging any person, animal, or thing in their path—and even destroying electrical equipment! Look inside to learn all about these destructive animal invaders.

Australia's Cane Toads
Overrun!

Feral Pigs
Chomp, Chomp!

Florida's Burmese Pythons
Squeezing the Everglades

Guam's Brown Tree Snakes
Hanging Out

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