

Earwigs

Earwigs are harmless to humans. Yet they suffer from a bad reputation as “pincher bugs” capable of delivering a painful pinch with their forceps, as well as from the myth that they like to crawl into human ears. Thus the name.

However, earwigs rarely crawl into human ears and in the few instances where this has happened the earwig was probably simply attracted by the dark opening as a place of refuge. The forceps (pinchers) on the end of the abdomen are harmless, and are only capable of giving a weak pinch. In reality the name probably originates from the Anglo Saxon “ear wicka” referring to the common presence of these insects on seed heads or “ears” of rye.

Earwigs are elongate flattened insects, with long slender antennae, short leathery wings and strong mobile, moveable forceps at the end of the abdomen.

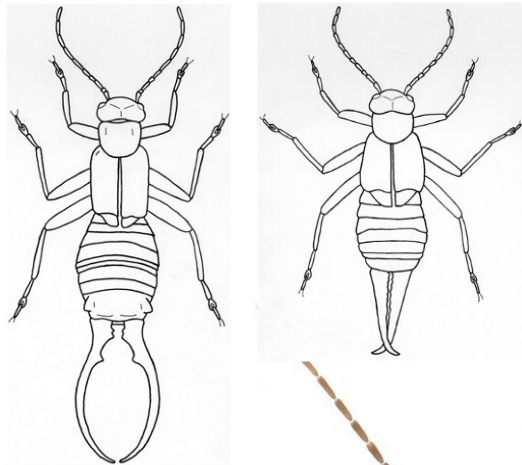
They can actually fly and most commonly do so in the spring. Males have large curved forceps and females smaller somewhat parallel ones. The forceps are apparently used defensively and in courtship. Eggs are laid in small under-ground chambers. When they hatch the young are tended by the female. One or two broods are raised per year.

During the day these nocturnal insects are found on the ground under stones or leaves, in cracks and crevices, under bark of dead logs and stumps, in compost and in other sheltered, damp spots. Earwigs generally feed at night on decaying or living vegetable matter, although they may also attack many kinds of garden pests, particularly in coastal areas and damp suburban habitats. They are known to feed on seedlings and new growth on many types of plants, as well as fruits and vegetables such as artichokes.

There are two common species of earwigs in California, the European earwig, *Forficula auricularia* L. and the striped earwig, *Labidura riparia* (Pallas). The European earwig is both a garden and crop pest. It was accidentally introduced into California in either plant

materials or soil from Europe. The striped earwig is most abundant in riparian areas near water although they may be attracted to lights at night.

Unlike the European earwig the striped earwig is primarily a predator, although it will occasionally feed on plant material. When crushed these earwigs emit a pungent odor. The species is common in southern California.



European Earwig male (left) and female (right).



Forficula auricularia earwig. Photo courtesy of Alexander Wild, www.alexanderwild.com.