

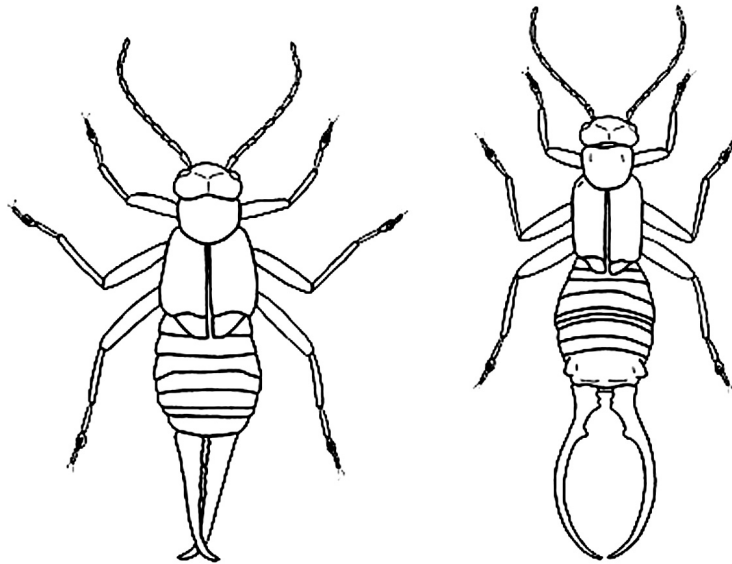


Information

Bohart Museum of Entomology

No. 004

Earwigs



European Earwig female (left) and male (right)

Earwigs are elongate flattened insects, with long slender antennae, short leathery wings and strong mobile, moveable forceps at the end of the abdomen. Males have large curved forceps and females smaller somewhat parallel ones. The forceps are apparently used defensively and during courtship.

The commonest species in California is the European earwig, *Forficula auricularia*. This species was accidentally introduced into California in either plant materials or soil from Europe.

Earwigs can fly and most commonly do so in the spring when males disperse in search of potential mates. After mating, a female lays eggs in small underground chambers and tends her young for several weeks. She raises one or two broods 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. Earwigs can be serious garden pests, particularly in coastal areas and damp

suburban habitats. They are known to attack new growth on many types of plants, as well as fruits and vegetables such as artichokes.

Earwigs are harmless to humans, yet they suffer from a bad reputation as "pincher bugs" capable of delivering a painful pinch with their forceps. The forceps (pinchers) on the end of the abdomen are harmless, and are only capable of giving a weak pinch. Their reputation is also tainted by a myth that they prefer to crawl into human ears. Although earwigs may on occasion crawl into human ears, it is not clear they would want to do so, unless simply attracted by the dark tunnel as a place of refuge.

The origin of the word "earwig" is a bit of a mystery but there are several interesting suggestions as to its etymology. According to a book titled *Things Not Generally Known* by D.A. Wells published in 1886: "ear-wig actually refers to the resemblance of the earwig's wings, when they are fully expanded for flight, to the human ear. Thus ear-wing, not ear-wig, which has no known meaning. The name is also traced to the Saxon "ear wigca", which refers to its destroying ears of grain and fruit."