

Silverfish and Firebrat

Description



The 'Silverfish' and the 'Firebrat' are closely related insects, both belonging to the group of insects known as bristletails. They are elongated wingless insects with a pair of long, fine antennae and three narrow, tail-like appendages which are frequently broken. Silverfish may grow to about 12mm in length but the Firebrat tends to be larger with much longer antennae. The body of both is covered with scales but the Silverfish as its name implies, is silvery and glistening, while the Firebrat is greyish with dark, irregular markings.

Life History

The female Silverfish is believed to lay about one hundred eggs, either singly or in groups, usually in crevices and cracks and not glued to the surface. They are small and white when first laid but soon turn brownish and are difficult to find. The time taken to hatch varies from two to eight weeks, depending on the temperature and humidity. Newly hatched insects are about 2mm long and resemble the adults in appearance. Development to maturity takes from a few months under favourable conditions to over a year if it is cool and dry.

The life cycle of the Firebrat is similar to that of the Silverfish but the female lays more eggs.

Habitat

The Silverfish is found where conditions are fairly damp, such as in kitchens, larders and particularly in bathrooms and basements. It may occur amongst books and papers, in slightly damp cupboards and behind skirting and loose wallpaper. It is a general scavenger in warehouses and granaries.

The Firebrat requires much higher temperatures, ideally between 32 and 41°C and can stand drier conditions. It is found in consistently hot places, such as bakeries, mainly living near ovens and hot pipes and is not uncommon in similar situations on ships.

Both the Silverfish and Firebrat are nocturnal in habit, hiding during the day and coming out in search of food at night. They move very rapidly when disturbed; turning on a light generally causes them to seek cover.

Food

Both species feed on carbohydrates with a small amount of protein. The Silverfish feeds mainly on small food particles and starchy paste on the back of old wallpaper which has become detached. It attacks the sizes, gums and glues of book bindings and some types of paper and may thus cause serious damage in libraries. It feeds also on fragments of dead insects and may damage textiles of vegetable origin such as cotton, linen and rayon which have been treated with special dressings. The Firebrat feeds mainly on food debris.

Control

These insects may be controlled by sprays or dusts suitable for the control of crawling insects. The insecticide should be blown or brushed into crevices, e.g. behind skirtings, cupboards, etc. Aerosol sprays for the control of crawling insects are suitable for small infestations, like that tub of Ant Killer most of us have around the home.