

What are they?

Yellow crazy ants are a highly aggressive tramp ant from south-east Asia that made it into Australia through our ports. In a suitable climate, such as the Queensland Wet Tropics, they can form “super colonies” that cover vast areas and carry huge social, environmental and financial impacts. They do not bite, but spray formic acid to blind and kill their prey.

Why we should be worried

They are a danger to people, pets and households

Once the ants reach super colony levels they can become a severe threat to people, especially children and the elderly, as well as pets. They can damage household electrical appliances and wiring.

One man in Australia has already suffered serious injury from yellow crazy ants. While sleeping at his home in Edmonton, Queensland, the ants swarmed all over his face, burning his eyes badly with their acid. And he's not alone, people's pets have been sprayed by the ants' acid, injuring their eyes, mouth and paws. The ants can also kill small and young animals including chickens and native animals.

They destroy entire ecosystems

Although the ants are tiny they can swarm in great numbers, killing much larger animals like lizards, frogs, small mammals, turtle hatchlings and bird chicks.

When their numbers hit super colony levels they can have a devastating impact on native wildlife and plants, upsetting entire ecosystems.



Yellow crazy ants have already created ecosystem collapse on Christmas Island, now the Queensland Wet Tropics World Heritage Area is at risk. Photo: David Wilson

On Christmas Island the ants have killed millions of the famous red land crabs and robber crabs, both of which play an important role in the island's forest floor ecology. Yellow crazy ants have created a huge increase in sap-sucking bugs and sooty moulds that severely damage plants and trees, further degrading the island's forests. Numbers of native insects and other small animals have also been dramatically reduced.

Yellow crazy ant colonies that have formed near sea bird colonies overseas have killed and deformed large numbers of chicks by constantly spraying them with acid.

While ant numbers and their impacts fluctuate depending on environmental conditions, Queensland's wet tropics make ideal habitat for yellow crazy ants and are especially vulnerable to invasion.

They are a huge financial burden

Yellow crazy ants are a huge threat to agriculture in Australia's warmer regions. By farming sugar-secreting scale insects and encouraging sooty moulds they can dramatically reduce the productivity of crops such as fruit trees and sugar cane.

Yellow crazy ants would also destroy tourism values in Queensland's Wet Tropics World Heritage rainforests region. Wet tropics tourism is worth \$2 billion a year.

Although the ants currently occupy a tiny proportion of their potential range, more than \$10 million has already been spent trying to contain them. If they become established over their potential range the ongoing costs of baiting to reduce their social, environmental and horticultural impacts would be a substantial financial burden to Australia.

Where are yellow crazy ants?

They live in natural bushland, along waterways, in urban areas and horticultural plantations. They have been found at more than 30 sites in Queensland and in a large scattered population in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. A single New South Wales infestation has already been eradicated.

Climate modelling indicates yellow crazy ants could spread right across Northern Australia from Queensland to Western Australia, across much of Queensland and into coastal and inland parts of NSW.

Areas with the most ideal habitat and climatic conditions, such as Queensland's wet tropics rainforests, will suffer the highest impacts.

Is eradication possible?

It is possible to eradicate yellow crazy ants with baiting programs. The baits are readily available and simple to use.

In the Northern Territory more than 2000ha has already been cleared of yellow crazy ants. Other infestations have also been successfully eradicated in Queensland and on Goodwood Island in NSW.

In Queensland's wet tropics, baiting over 830ha of land has substantially reduced yellow crazy ant numbers and smaller infestations have been eradicated. As always, achieving successful eradication will depend on the duration and resourcing of the baiting program and support from landowners.

Ongoing research in the Northern Territory, Queensland and on Christmas Island has greatly increased our knowledge of the most effective methods for controlling yellow crazy ants.

What's happening now?

Queensland's main infestation is 830ha in and around Wet Tropics World Heritage listed rainforest. The infestation was baited by Biosecurity Queensland until the Queensland Government removed funding in 2012. Due to the threat to the rainforest, the Australian Government provided a \$2 million Caring for our Country Grant for ongoing eradication, which runs out this year.

There is no funding for control or monitoring of other Queensland infestations.

The Northern Territory infestation is being managed by eradicating yellow crazy ants near urban households to prevent people unintentionally moving the ants to



Chicks of the nationally endangered cassowary would be easy prey for a yellow crazy ant super colony. Photo: Dan Gordon, CC BY-NC 2.0

new areas. The ants are also being eradicated from mining leases as part of environmental rehabilitation. The remaining infestation remains unmanaged, and covers 300km², an area larger than the state of Victoria.

Why is there still a problem?

Despite the known impacts of yellow crazy ant infestations they continue to arrive in Australian ports. Our biosecurity system has stopped some incursions but

not nearly enough. Since 2001 an average of two new outbreaks have been detected each year in Queensland – the rate of interceptions is increasing. There may be many more due to lack of surveillance.

In Queensland yellow crazy ants continue to pose a severe threat to the Wet Tropics, a situation not helped by low levels of stop-and-start funding for eradication efforts.

The Queensland Government's decision to discontinue

the eradication program in 2012 was a major failing. It has since conceded it made the wrong call.

Until new technologies for ant control become available, the containment strategy employed in Arnhem Land is the most appropriate for that infestation.

What needs to happen?

The Australian and Queensland governments need to urgently commit funding to a properly resourced eradication program for yellow crazy ants in the Wet Tropics.

The Queensland Government needs to undertake mapping and assessment of all other known infestations. A high priority needs to go to eradicating infestations:

1. In climatic areas that could allow the development of super colonies.
2. Near people, to avoid the potential for people to unknowingly move yellow crazy ants into new areas.

New incursions of yellow crazy ants into Australia must be avoided. Each new arrival can bring genetic material that has the potential to increase the species' ability to adapt to Australian conditions while new outbreaks make eradication and control efforts more difficult and costly.

We need a detailed investigation identifying the main ways yellow crazy ants and other tramp ants are arriving in Australia, so that these weaknesses in Australia's biosecurity system can be addressed.

The high number of tramp ants reaching Australian ports indicates that it would be most efficient to improve pre-border security. This means improving hygiene, inspections and treatments in the countries of origin,



It is important people do not move yellow crazy ants to new areas in soil, garden waste and pot plants.

before timber, machinery and other goods are shipped to Australia.

More rigorous inspections and protocols are also needed at Australian ports to ensure yellow crazy ants and other tramp ants do not make it past our ports.

What can I do?

- **Take action!** Let politicians know they cannot ignore yellow crazy ants. Go to invasives.org.au/act-now/ and tell the Queensland and Australian governments they need to act on yellow crazy ants.
- If you live near a sea port, freight terminal or a current infestation, keep a look out for yellow crazy ants and other tramp ants. If you think you have found yellow crazy ants please contact a local biosecurity agency,



Baiting programs are effective at eradicating yellow crazy ants if they are properly resourced.

we have listed appropriate agencies on our website at invasives.org.au/report-ants.

- If you live within a yellow crazy ant infestation be careful not to spread them to new areas in soil, garden waste and pot plants.
- Support the Invasive Species Council's efforts to improve biosecurity by making a donation at invasives.org.au/donate.