



SPRINGTAILS

Springtails are primitive insects that occur in nearly every climatic condition in the world. Species can be found in high mountain regions, intertidal areas of ocean beaches, pools, streams, snow fields, forest floors, and a wide variety of domestic environments. Most species are blue to gray, though the color range includes white and bright yellow. They can greatly alarm homeowners, particularly when it is very wet in fall, winter, and spring. During these times springtails often occur in enormous numbers and become very noticeable as moving "piles of soot" in driveways, backyards, or on the surface of mud puddles.

Biology

Springtails are usually 2 mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ inch) or less in length and always wingless. They get their name from the ability to catapult themselves up to 4 inches by means of a tail-like mechanism which is tucked up under the abdomen. When they sense danger, this device is released from a "catch" and "springs" them away from the danger source. They are moisture-loving and can be found under boards, houseplants, pots, bark, rotten logs, mushroom beds, pool surfaces, snow, or wherever dampness collects, often accompanied by shade. They usually feed on mildew, algae, and rotting vegetable matter; however, under some conditions springtails feed on living plant tissue.

Pest Status

Springtails are actually beneficial. They help reduce decaying vegetation to soil, and, since they feed on fungi, they tend to keep the molds down. They are also among the few organisms known to break down DDT in the soil. Their pest status is that of a "nuisance" or "dooryard" pest. When very abundant, springtails can enter homes through doorways, screens, or other openings. Normally, if the humidity is low within, they will quickly shrivel and die. However, if mildew is present within the home, free moisture occurs around water pipes, or houseplants have decaying organic matter in the pots, then springtails can persist and be a nuisance. They are also among the most troublesome swimming pool pests, as they accumulate in large numbers on the water surface.



Typical springtail.

Control

Control of springtails is rarely necessary unless they are becoming household nuisances. Prevention of establishment is normally all that is necessary. The best prevention is to maintain low humidity within the building. After entering they will dry out and quickly die. Vacuuming will eliminate the remains. Eliminate any materials that are moldy, such as old mattresses, since these provide good habitats for these animals. Springtails can best be eliminated as nuisance pests on houseplants through soil sterilization or soil replacement, where possible.

If control is necessary for nuisance or aesthetic reasons outside the home, springtails can be treated. Check with your local County Extension office for currently recommended products.

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