

NEWS RELEASE

Itch Mite Outbreak May Be First in North America

Crawford County Health Department – The species of itch mite that made news in southeast Kansas and other parts of the Midwest last summer is not common to the United States, according to Kansas State University Research and Extension entomologists Alberto Broce, Ludek Zurek and Robert Brown.

“Through our collaborative work with personnel from the Department of Entomology of the University of Nebraska, the Crawford Co. Health Department, KDHE, Kansas State Extension, Pittsburg State University and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, we identified this particular mite as a *Pyemotes*, commonly known as an itch mite” said Broce. “We are investigating reports from 1992-94 of similar, but not as extensive, bite outbreaks in order to estimate how long ago this mite might have entered North America,” Broce said.

The mites made headlines when mysterious bites were reported in early September from the Pittsburg, Kan. area, Broce said. Soon after, bites were reported by residents of Manhattan, Kan., Lincoln, Neb. and several other communities in eastern Nebraska, Joplin and Saint Louis, Mo.

There is no pain when these mites bite, he said. In fact most people are unaware that they have been bitten until the next day, when quarter-size reddened welts with a pimple on their center appear. The bites are most commonly distributed over the neck and shoulders and on the upper torso where clothing hangs loosely. They appear the day after people are involved in outdoor activities.

In a few cases, people with numerous bites visited physicians or even went to the emergency room.

In some areas where the outbreaks occurred, mites of the genus *Pyemotes*, were found feeding on midge larvae that cause the leaf marginal galls in pin and red oak trees, Broce said.

Pregnant (gravid) female mites with distended abdomens give birth to up to 250 adult mites that mate immediately after emerging from their mother.

“These tiny female mites, invisible to the naked eye, are dispersed by the wind,

so bites could occur on people situated downwind and away from infested trees,” the entomologist said.

Cal Wellbourn, an entomologist in the Division of Plant Industry at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in Gainesville, identified the mite as *Pyemotes herfsi*, a species from Central Europe where it feeds on larvae of various moth species, Broce said. This is the first time the presence of this particular species of itch mite has been confirmed in North America.

Although the mites prefer to feed on moth larvae, there are numerous reports from Europe of this species biting humans, he said.

Repellents based on DEET do provide protection from these bites. A change of clothing and a hot soap shower after working out-of-doors, especially around oak trees, should help reduce the incidence of the bites. Spraying insecticides in the environment does not appear to help in fighting the mites.

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