K-STATE Research and Extension

Home and Horticultural PESTS

Attic Flies

"Attic flies" is an umbrella term applied to many species of flies that enter homes in the fall and may become a nuisance in late winter and early spring. These flies overwinter as adults in attics, dormers, seldom used rooms, and within walls of some rural and city residences. Fairchild Hall on the K-State campus is invaded by overwintering face flies every year. In early fall, attic flies aggregate on outer walls of homes. They enter attics by forcing themselves through small cracks, vents, and openings providing access to hibernating sites. By winter, accumulated flies may number in the thousands. About 20,000 face flies were recorded one winter in the attic of a rural house near Manhattan, Kan. Researchers are still puzzled about how attic flies use the same homes or buildings for hibernating sites year after year.

Attic flies survive freezing winter temperatures by producing and storing glycerol, an antifreeze protectant similar to the antifreeze used in car radiators. They do not damage home furnishings, nor do they bite. They are a nuisance merely by their presence. On sunny winter or early spring days that warm up hibernating sites, or when it is time for the flies to terminate hibernation, they become active. While trying to exit homes they enter living quarters (usually upstairs rooms). Even after the flies are eliminated from a room, many more may be buzzing and littering again within a few days. The flies' continuous appearance in certain rooms is due to their movement within the walls, as well as their escape through such openings as those for the pulleys of sash windows.

In Kansas, the most common attic fly is the face fly, a species similar in appearance to the house fly but darker in color. The markings between and beneath the eyes are silvery on face flies and golden on house flies. Cluster flies are a larger species with similar overwintering habits and may also occur in Kansas.

Face flies do not breed and multiply in attics and overwintering sites, nor do they feed on cattle secretions while hibernating. Face flies that exit and re-enter hibernating sites may feed on sugars in honeydew residues produced by aphids and other insects the previous growing season. Many overwintering flies consume only water; this may kill them if that imbibed water freezes.

In spring, face flies mate shortly after emerging from winter quarters. Females then fly to pastures and seek horses or cattle. They feed on secretions from eyes and nostrils. They then lay their eggs in fresh cow dung. Several generations occur in pastures each summer before the flies seek protection for the winter.

The winter survival rate of attic flies has been estimated to be as low as 2 percent. This means that whether or not chemical control measures are used, dead flies may accumulate in attics and wall voids. Extreme accumulations of dead flies in unseen areas have been measured by the bucketful.

Carpet beetles are attracted to the odor of the dead flies, as well as that of other insects such as boxelder bugs, which may be mixed among them. Carpet beetles lay eggs on the dead flies. Hatching beetle larvae use the flies as food, producing many generations of the beetles. Eventually, carpet beetles enter living spaces of the homes, where they may cause extensive damage to carpets, carpet backing, woolens, and other non-synthetic clothing.

As difficult as it is to prevent attic flies from entering a home, it is more difficult and expensive to cope with associated carpet beetle problems that may develop. For more information, ask at your local K-State Research and Extension office for a copy of the fact sheet *Carpet Beetles*.

In northern states, home damage from woodpeckers has been associated with attic fly problems. Woodpeckers detect flies beneath siding and shingles and peck holes to gain access to the flies within. This may be why woodpeckers persistently peck at some Kansas homes.

Control Measures

Non-chemical — The control of attic flies will not be permanent until the entry points are sealed. If flies are prevented from entering a building, they will not become a nuisance. Home maintenance greatly reduces infestations. Outfit residences with tight-fitting screens, especially on the upstairs and attic windows and vents. Place screens on ventilators, louvers, air conditioner openings, and other potential entryways. Caulk cracks and openings near window, doors, vents, and other possible fly entry sites. Seal holes, cracks

and splits in the exterior siding. Homes built before the use of plywood or insulating sheathing beneath exterior siding are more vulnerable to fly entry. However, even new homes sometimes experience attic fly problems.

Chemical — When using chemical insecticides, follow label directions. Watch for a few days in the fall, usually in mid-October, when flies are resting in abundance on the outside of the home. Spray the walls with an insecticide, being sure to treat around windows, beneath eaves, and above doorways. Also treat window frames between storm and interior windows. If a window sash has pulley openings, direct some of the spray into the opening and plug the opening with cotton.

Flies inside the home can be killed with aerosol space sprays. Dead, dying or sluggish flies can be picked up with a broom or a vacuum cleaner and disposed of properly. Tightly enclosed rooms with little air movement, such as attics, storage rooms, and closets can be successfully treated by hanging an insecticide impregnated resin strip.

Insecticides are chemical products that, when applied to targeted pests, disrupt normal physiological processes and cause them to die. The active ingredient is the actual component or killing agent contained in an insecticidal product. Many companies may purchase the same active ingredient and use it to formulate a product or product line. To further complicate product selection, an individual manufacturer may use a single active ingredient in various formulations including dusts, granules, baits, emulsifiable concentrates, ready-to-use products, or hose-end applicators. Not all products are marketed at all retail outlets. Users may have to search for specific products registered for use against attic flies.

The number of insecticidal products makes it impractical to list all products that are registered for use in Kansas. For instance, a recent check revealed that one active ingredient was contained in 675 different products registered with the Kansas Department of Agriculture. It is the responsibility of the end user to read product labels to ensure safe and proper use against the intended pest.

While not all pests may be listed on a product label, under Kansas Administrative Regulation 4-13-28 of the Kansas Pesticide Law, any pesticide may be applied for the purpose of controlling a pest which is not specified on the pesticide's label or labeling provided that: (a)(1) the pesticide's label or labeling authorizes application of the pesticide to the same crop, animal, or site requiring application; (2) the pest to be controlled belongs to the same general group of pests intended to be controlled by the pesticide to be applied; (3) the pesticide's label or labeling does not specifically prohibit its application to the target pest to be controlled, or to the crop, animal, or site to which the pesticide is to be applied; and (4) the application of the pesticide to the target pest, or to the crop, animal or site, has not been prohibited by rules and regulations promulgated by the secretary. (b) Each pesticide which is applied in accordance with the provisions of the abovementioned subsection (a) of this regulation shall be deemed not to cause any unreasonable adverse effects on the environment, nor to endanger the health, safety or welfare of the citizens of this state.

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