



The flying termites or alates

There are lots of misconceptions about flying termites or termite alates. In scientific lingo, we call them imago's or alates (winged reproductives). Some people think these flying termites can attack wood. Others think these flying termites can fight (with ants). The truth is, these flying termites are winged reproductives that comprise either males or females whose sole purpose is to start new colonies and become the future king and queen of their new colony.

At certain times of the year, a termite colony will produce future kings and queens to take part in a pre-nuptial flight in synchrony with other colonies of the same species. This happens for most of the matured colonies of the same species in a particular area; young colonies do not produce alates because of the resources required to nurture them to maturity and then release them.

These flying termites are fed some of the best food the nest has to offer and well taken care of until the big day. As such, they are loaded with fat stores designed to last them for a few months, until the first batch of eggs hatch into workers who will then forage for food and in the case of fungus building species like the *Macrotermitinae*, construct the first fungus combs.

For some species, these future kings and queens look so different from the ordinary workers or soldiers or are very much larger than the other castes that they may seem to be from an entirely new species to the layman.



(Above) Flying termites (alates) swarming around a fluorescent light.



(Above) Alates belonging to a *Coptotermes* species, with or without wings.



(Above) A flying termite shedding its wings by means of using its rear legs and detaching from its wing stumps.



(Above) Only the flying termites have eyes, other castes do not.

Depending on species, these flying termite swarms can occur once or few times a year, per colony. The typical swarming season is after a spate of rain, following a dry spell, and usually takes place at or after dusk. In rural areas, these swarms congregate around lights and can be large. And no, these flying termite swarms do not threaten your home or are dangerous or aggressive in any way whatsoever.

These flying termite swarms are best regarded as a natural phenomenon, which are likely declining in urban areas as the numerous streetlamps and other light sources disperse swarms and isolated termite alates are easy prey for ants, birds, lizards and other predators. Very few survive to start a new colony. Termites are poor fliers; the average dispersal range for most species is less than 100 meters (300 ft) from the original colony.

It is impossible to stop a swarm once it commences, as alates will be attracted to light. So, to try and contain them best to switch on one lamp and have them congregate to the one room. This will assist with cleaning up.