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Thursday, May 15, 2008 1:31 AM EDT

New UF webcam documents lives of ants and termites

By JENNA LANIA, Alligator Contributing Writer

Insects can't get any privacy these days.

A handful of UF entomology experts, partnering with chemical company BASF, unveiled a 24-hour live webcam in March, which documents the lives of termites and ants.

More than 3,000 ants dine on peanut butter and honey in the tiny kitchen, furnished with dollhouse cabinets, a table and chairs, said Phil Koehler, UF entomologist.

The several hundred termites on set dwell in a smaller container where they eat their way through a paper house.

Cameras are set up to zoom in every 10 minutes, giving intimate details about the lives of these creatures, he said.

"We had some arguments with BASF over whether we should (zoom in) or not," he said. "I said 'yes' because it made it fun."

But it isn't fun for homeowners when the bugs invade.

"They are a tremendous problem," Koehler said. "For instance, the ants that we have in there are fire ants, Florida fire ants, and in Florida, they cost everyone about \$1.3 billion a year."

The ants could potentially rack up a bill by attacking food, shorting out electrical equipment and invading structures, he said.

Termites are sly little buggers as well.

"Termites cost more than a billion dollars a year," Koehler said. "Of course, they eat the wood of houses, but they also furtively damage houses so that they are not energy efficient anymore."

Ants and termites are the number one and two pests in Florida, respectively, he said.



(Marianne Lijewski / Alligator Staff) Roberto Pereira, a research associate in UF's entomology and nematology department, holds a dropper over the ant colony while Phil Koehler, an entomologist with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, holds a termite colony sealed in a glass plate.

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By watching the insects, hopefully people can learn how harmful they can be to home and health.

Roberto Pereira, a UF Department of Entomology and Nematology research associate, said those looking for information on insects and insect control are more likely to watch.

"Many people may not be as interested in insects as we are, but there is some entertainment there for everyone, at least for a short time."

To watch the live feed, visit: www.AntInstitute.com or www.TermitelInstitute.com.

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