

Termites: Appetite for Destruction

Read the passage.

Large or small, families are fun to study. All family members have a role. All family members are unique. All family members like to eat cellulose. They do, that is, if they're part of a termite family.

You've probably heard of termites, but how much do you know about them? For one thing, termites need to eat wood to get the cellulose they need for food. Cellulose is found in the cell walls of plants and is a key ingredient in wood.

Many people feel that termites are nothing but destructive pests. However, like most creatures, they play an important role in the ecosystem. Termites break down dead wood and are like nature's recyclers. They themselves are food for ants, anteaters, and lizards. Still, termites can cause problems. They live in large groups, called colonies. Some live in the ground, while others live in wood above ground, such as in buildings.

Who is in the termite family? A colony may have as few as a hundred or as many as several million members. There are termite nymphs that are blind

and wingless. Nymphs are often called workers because they clean and repair the nest, care for termite babies, and help build the nest as the colony grows. Soldier termites are larger and have powerful jaws to protect the colony. Still, soldier termites are blind and wingless and are cared for by the workers. Soldier termites of some species are sometimes armed with the ability to shoot a sticky substance from their heads to slow enemies.

Finally, there are the reproductive termites, including the king and queen of the colony. These are the termites that produce offspring. Once every year they produce termites that have wings. These winged termites swarm into the air during spring and summer to mate before falling back to the ground. Then they set out to start new termite colonies. They're ready to start their own cellulose-eating families!



Answer the questions.

- Which of these is not a member of the termite family?
 - soldier
 - watchman
 - worker
 - king and queen

2. Explain in your own words why termites like to eat wood. _____

3. True or false? Termites prefer to live in cold, dry places such as the Arctic tundra. _____

4. If a soldier termite does not have powerful jaws for fighting its enemy, how does it do battle? _____

5. Describe how termites fit into a natural ecosystem. _____

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Answer Key

1. b
2. Answers will vary but could include the fact that termites like to eat wood because wood contains their favorite food, cellulose.
3. False
4. Some soldier termites have the ability to squirt a sticky substance from their heads that slows the enemy.
5. Answers will vary but could include the following:
Termites are nature’s recyclers. They break down dead wood in the wild, helping to keep a forest “clean.”
Termites are food for ants, anteaters, and lizards.