

UF/IFAS Extension Pasco Fact Sheet 16-03

'Tree Cattle' Bugging You?

Many homeowners call the UF/IFAS Extension Pasco County Office in a panic. The first thing they say is that there are hoards of strange bugs swirling around their trees, like oaks and cabbage palms. The next thing they mention is the presence of a webbing often surrounding the bugs as they migrate from one location on the tree to another. While this is certainly startling to some, it's actually a very fascinating dance of insects called bark lice or "tree cattle". While they are related to book lice, *Archipsocus nomas*, the scientific name for the bark louse, is not a true louse. It's a species of scavenger insect known for cleaning the bark of trees of fungi, dead animal bodies and even dead lichen and plant material. The webs are communially spun silk believed to protect the barklice from predators such as birds and lizards. Luckily, these insects are not harmful to you or your landscape plants. They are actually quiet beneficial and help to recycle nutrients from the dead "stuff" back into usable nutrients. The nymphs, or immature stage of life, closely resembles the adult stage but lacks wings. Adults are normally ¼" long. They are brown to gray or black and the webbing is often pale yellow or white. When disturbed, the "herd" scatters quickly and often in unison giving them the common name "tree cattle". You'll often notice several generations on one tree and they are typically observed from May-October. Since these are beneficials and not harmful, no control is necessary – especially chemical sprays that may harm other desirable insects. If you see these odd insects herding around your trees, stop and watch – they are truly fascinating to behold.

Adult bark lice



Photo Credit: Leslie Dixon

Nymphs or immature bark louse



Photo Credit: <http://bugguide.net/node/view/26100/bgpage>

Webbing



Photo Credit: Whitney Elmore

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