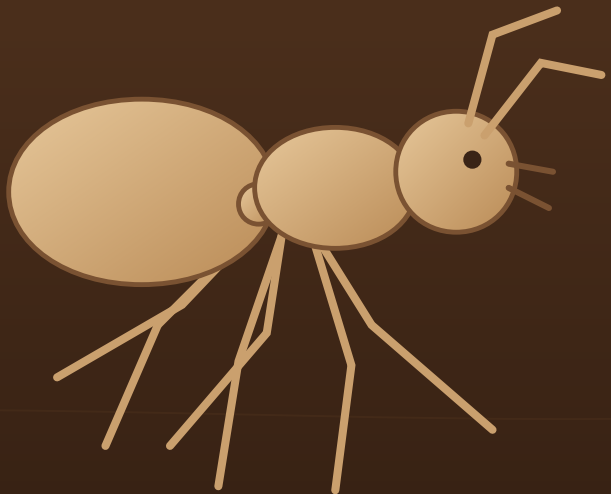

THE HONEST HOMEOWNER'S GUIDE

Carpenter Ants on Your House

What they are, whether they're a threat,
and exactly what to do about it.



Carpenter Ants on Your House

The Honest Homeowner's Guide

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Carpenter Ants on Your House

*What they are, whether they are a threat
to your home, and exactly what to do about
it — written by someone who keeps them
on purpose.*

Sabri Hayouni

ANTADDICT.COM

Carpenter Ants on Your House: The Honest Homeowner's Guide

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so. Product and treatment decisions are your own; follow all label directions, which are the law.

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Contents

Start Here: How to Use This Book	i
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PART I • REALITY CHECK

1 There Are Ants on My House. What Now?	1
2 Is It Actually a Carpenter Ant?	2
3 Why They Are on <i>Your</i> House Specifically	3

PART II • THREAT ASSESSMENT

4 Do Carpenter Ants Actually Damage Houses?	•
5 Foragers vs. a Real Nest	•
6 Parent and Satellite Colonies	•

PART III • WHAT TO DO

7 When You Can Handle It Yourself	•
8 When You Need a Professional	•
9 Prevention: Making Your House Unattractive	•

PART IV • DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

10 Inside a Carpenter Ant Colony	•
11 A Regional Guide to U.S. Carpenter Ants	•

BACK MATTER

Frequently Asked Questions · Glossary · References ·

START HERE

How to Use This Book

Let me tell you something that most people writing about carpenter ants will never admit: I like these animals. I keep *Camponotus* colonies on purpose. I feed them, watch them, and have spent years learning how they actually live. So when I tell you not to panic about the ants on your siding, understand where that is coming from. I am not trying to sell you a treatment plan. I have no van in your driveway and no monthly contract to protect. I just know the biology, and the biology is far less frightening than the internet would have you believe.

That is the entire reason this book exists. Search “carpenter ants in house” and you will drown in pages built to scare you into a phone call. Half of them get the basic facts wrong. They will tell you these ants are “eating your home,” which is simply false, and in the process they will talk you past the two or three checks that would actually tell you whether you have a problem at all.

This book is organized the way a calm, competent friend would walk you through it, in four parts. **Part I** is triage: what you are looking at, how to be sure it is a carpenter ant, and why it chose your house. **Part II** is the honest threat assessment: whether these ants damage homes, and how to tell a harmless foraging trail from a nest living in your walls. **Part III** is action: what you can safely do yourself, when to call a

professional, and how to make your house unappealing for good. **Part IV** is for the curious: the colony biology that makes carpenter ants behave the way they do, and a field guide to the species you will actually meet across the United States.

IF YOU ONLY HAVE TWO MINUTES

Read the Quick Answer box at the top of Chapter 1, then the triage table. That alone will tell most homeowners whether they can relax or need to keep reading. Everything after that is depth for when you want it.

A note on trust. Every factual claim in this book is drawn from the primary carpenter-ant literature and from university extension guidance, and the sources are numbered and listed at the back. Where the science is genuinely uncertain, I say so rather than rounding up to a scary number. That honesty is the whole point. Let us begin.

— **Sabri Hayouni, antaddict.com**

PART I • REALITY CHECK • CHAPTER ONE

01

There Are Ants on My House. What Now?

Before you spray anything or call anyone, spend sixty seconds here. Most of what looks like an emergency is not one.

QUICK ANSWER

If you are seeing large black or black-and-red ants walking on your siding, deck, windowsills, or foundation, you are almost certainly looking at **foragers**, not a house being eaten alive. Carpenter ants do **not** eat wood.¹ A trail of ants on the outside of your home is normal ant behavior and, by itself, is not structural damage. Your job is to work through three questions in order: (1) Is it actually a carpenter ant? (2) Is there a *nest* in or on your house, or are these ants just visiting? (3) Does that mean you handle it yourself or call a pro? This chapter gets you triaged in a few minutes; the rest of the book answers each question in full.

Panic is the most expensive thing in pest control. I have watched homeowners spend hundreds of dollars and empty three cans of spray at a problem that a five-dollar change to a downspout would have solved. So the first thing I want you to do is put the spray can down. Nothing that is happening on the outside of your house right now is going to get meaningfully worse in the next hour while you figure out what you are actually dealing with.

Carpenter ants are big, they move with purpose, and when a dozen of them are marching along your fascia board it feels like an invasion. But size and drama are not the same as danger. These are among the most common ants in North America, and the overwhelming majority of the time a homeowner sees them, the ants are foraging — commuting between a nest and a food source — not tunneling through a load-bearing beam.^{1,4} The whole trick to staying calm and spending your money well is learning to tell those two situations apart. That is what Part I is for.

Take a breath: what you are probably seeing

Carpenter ant workers travel surprising distances to find food. Foraging ranges of roughly 100 yards from the nest are well documented, and individual ants have been recorded even farther.¹ Sit with that number for a second, because it changes everything about how you should read the ants on your wall. A colony living in a dead tree, an old stump, or a woodpile at the back of your lot can send foragers all the way to your kitchen

window and back. The ants are on your house; the *nest* may be nowhere near it.

This is the single most important idea in the entire book, so I will say it plainly: **ants on your house are not the same as ants in your house, and neither one automatically means a nest in your walls.** Most homeowners never separate these three things, which is exactly why the scare-marketing works. Once you do separate them, the problem shrinks to its real size.

HERE IS THE PART EVERYONE ELSE SKIPS

Carpenter ants are ranchers. A huge share of their diet is honeydew, the sugary waste that aphids and scale insects excrete while feeding on plants.² If you have aphid-covered shrubs or a big tree near the house, the ants trailing up your wall may simply be commuting to their livestock in that tree. In cases like that, the real fix is the tree or the shrub, not the wall — and certainly not a can of spray aimed at the siding. We will come back to this in Chapter 3.

The sixty-second triage

Here is the fast version of what an experienced eye does when it first sees ants on a house. Run through it before you do anything else. None of it requires tools, and it will tell you roughly how worried to be.

RAPID TRIAGE: WHAT YOU SEE VS. WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS

What you are seeing	What it usually means	Urgency
A few large ants outdoors on siding, deck, or foundation	Normal foraging. Very common in spring and summer.	Low
A steady trail along an outdoor edge, especially at dusk	An established foraging route to a food source. Worth tracing, not panicking over.	Low–Moderate
Ants indoors, occasionally, near windows or the kitchen	Foragers entering to find food or water. Often a nest is still outdoors.	Moderate
Ants indoors consistently, plus faint rustling in a wall or small piles of what looks like sawdust	Possible nest (or satellite nest) inside the structure. This is the one to investigate carefully.	High
Winged ants emerging <i>indoors</i> in spring	A mature nest inside the building released reproductives. Strong signal of an interior nest.	High

Notice that four of the five rows are low to moderate. That is not me being reassuring for its own sake; that is the honest base rate. The high-urgency rows share a common thread — evidence *inside* the structure — and the rest of this book is largely about how to confirm or rule that out. If you landed on one of the top two rows, you can probably exhale. If you landed on one of the

bottom two, keep reading closely; Chapters 5 and 6 are written for you.

What carpenter ants are, in one paragraph

Carpenter ants are ants in the genus *Camponotus*, a large group with many species across the United States.¹ They get the name “carpenter” because some species excavate galleries in wood to make their nests. The critical word is *excavate*. Unlike termites, they do not digest wood and gain nothing nutritional from it; they simply carve it away to make room, and push the debris out.^{1,3} They strongly prefer wood that is already softened by moisture or decay, which is a gift to you, because it means a dry, well-maintained house is a genuinely poor nesting target. We will unpack every piece of that in Part II.

The three questions this book answers

Everything ahead hangs on three questions, answered in order. Rushing past the first two to get to “how do I kill them” is how people waste money and miss the real issue.

1. **Is it actually a carpenter ant?** Several common ants get mistaken for carpenter ants, and one very different insect — the termite — is the mistake that actually matters. Chapter 2 makes you accurate.
2. **Is there a nest in or on your house, or are these visitors?** This is the question that determines

whether you have a cosmetic nuisance or a structural concern. Chapters 5 and 6 give you the evidence to decide.

3. **Do you handle it, or call a professional?** There is a real answer here, and it is not always “call a pro.” Chapters 7 and 8 draw the line honestly.

ONE THING TO RULE OUT NOW

If the insects you are seeing have wings, a thick waist with no obvious pinch, and straight (not elbowed) antennae, stop and turn to Chapter 2's ant-versus-termite section immediately. Winged termites and winged ants are easy to confuse, and the difference is the difference between a nuisance and a genuine structural threat. It takes ten seconds to tell them apart once you know what to look for.

A keeper's honest take

I will be straight with you, the way I wish more people in this space were. In six years of keeping ants and answering messages from worried homeowners, the ratio I see is lopsided: for every genuine in-wall nest, there are many, many cases of harmless foragers, aphid-tending trails, and moisture problems that had nothing to do with the ants at all. The ants were the smoke alarm, not the fire. That does not mean you ignore them — a smoke alarm is worth listening to — but it does mean the correct first move is to investigate, not to panic and spray. Spraying a foraging trail feels productive and accomplishes almost nothing, because

you are killing the messengers while the colony, wherever it lives, keeps sending more.

The bottom line

Ants on your house are common, usually foragers, and not proof of damage. Carpenter ants do not eat wood, they travel far from the nest, and they favor moisture-damaged wood you probably want to fix anyway. Work the three questions in order — identify, locate, decide — and you will spend your effort and money where they actually matter. Turn the page and let us make sure you are even looking at a carpenter ant, because getting that wrong is the most expensive mistake of all.

PART I • REALITY CHECK • CHAPTER TWO

02

Is It Actually a Carpenter Ant?

Three ants get blamed for carpenter-ant damage they never caused — and one insect that isn't an ant at all is the one you truly cannot afford to misidentify.

QUICK ANSWER

A carpenter ant is **large** (workers roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, or 6–13 mm), usually **black or black-and-red**, with a **single-node pinched waist, elbowed antennae**, and — the giveaway most people miss — an **evenly rounded, smoothly arched upper body** with no spines when viewed from the side.^{1,3} If your insects have wings and you are worried about termites, remember the three tells: ants have a **narrow pinched waist, elbowed antennae**, and **front wings longer than the back wings**; termites have a **broad waist, straight beaded antennae**, and **four wings of equal length**.⁴ Get the termite question right first; it is the only misidentification that changes what you should do.

Accurate identification is not pedantry here; it is the difference between an afternoon of caulking and a serious conversation with a structural pest company. So before we talk about behavior, nests, or control, we are going to make you genuinely good at knowing what you are looking at. The good news is that carpenter ants are among the easier ants to recognize, because they are big and they have a distinctive profile. The one that demands care is telling an ant from a termite, and I will give you a method that works even without a hand lens.

The carpenter ant look

Start with size, because it filters out most of the field. Carpenter ants are among the largest ants you will encounter around a home. Within a single colony

you will actually see a *range* of sizes, from small workers to hefty ones, and that range is itself a clue we will return to.¹ The body is black, or a two-tone black-and-reddish depending on the species and region.

Now the profile, which is the professional's tell. Seen from the side, a carpenter ant's mid-body (the part between the waist and the head) forms a single, smooth, even arch, like the top of a rainbow, with no spines or bumps sticking up.^{1,3} Many other ants have an angular or spiny profile there. Combine that even arch with the large size and a single node at the waist, and you have a carpenter ant with high confidence. Their antennae, like those of all ants, are *elbowed* — bent like a jointed arm — which becomes important the moment termites enter the picture.

CARPENTER ANT VS. THE ANTS IT GETS CONFUSED WITH

Feature	Carpenter ant (<i>Camponotus</i>)	Pavement / odorous house ant	Field ant (<i>Formica</i>)
Size	Large, $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ in, sizes vary within colony	Small, $\sim\frac{1}{8}$ in	Medium, similar to some carpenter ants
Side profile of mid- body	Smooth, evenly rounded, no spines	Often uneven; pavement ant has spines	Notched or uneven, not smoothly arched
Waist nodes	One node	Two nodes (pavement/ odorous)	One node
Crush test smell	No distinctive odor	Odorous house ant smells like rotten coconut	Sometimes a faint formic- acid tang
Nests in wood?	Yes, some species excavate galleries	No (soil, pavement cracks)	Usually soil and mounds, not structures

Two field tricks from that table deserve a callout. First, the number of nodes on the waist. If you can see two little bumps between the mid-body and the abdomen, you are not looking at a carpenter ant — you likely have a pavement ant or odorous house ant, neither of which nests in your structural wood.⁴ Second, the smell. If you crush a small ant and it releases a surprisingly strong smell people describe as

rotten coconut or blue cheese, that is the odorous house ant, and you can cross carpenter ants off entirely.

Ant or termite? The one that actually matters

Here is the misidentification with real money on the line. In spring, both carpenter ant colonies and termite colonies release *winged reproductives* that fly off to start new colonies. A pile of large winged insects near a windowsill sends people straight into worst-case thinking, and the two look superficially similar at a glance. But they are easy to tell apart once you know the three features, and no magnification is needed.

WINGED ANT VS. WINGED TERMITE — THE THREE TELLS

Feature	Ant (including carpenter ant)	Termite
Waist	Narrow, sharply pinched (“wasp waist”)	Broad; body looks like a straight tube
Antennae	Elbowed, bent like a jointed arm	Straight, like a tiny string of beads
Wings	Front pair clearly longer than back pair	All four wings the same length
Wing durability	Wings stay attached	Wings shed easily; you often find loose wings

DO NOT GUESS ON THIS ONE

Carpenter ants damage wood far more slowly and less thoroughly than termites, because they only excavate galleries and do not consume the wood.^{1,3} If your three tells point to **termite** — broad waist, straight antennae, equal wings — treat that as a separate and more serious issue, and get a licensed termite inspection. This book is about carpenter ants; it is not a termite manual, and the two problems are handled differently.

If you want a keepsake test: capture one specimen with a piece of clear tape and look at it against a white background in good light. The pinched waist alone resolves most cases in under ten seconds. Ant equals pinched; termite equals not pinched. Everything else is confirmation.

Why size alone will fool you

People love to identify carpenter ants by size, and it half-works, but there is a trap. Carpenter ant colonies are *polymorphic*: a single colony produces workers across a continuous range of sizes, from modest to large, all with the same body plan.¹ So the “that one is too small to be a carpenter ant” reasoning fails constantly — a small worker and a large worker from the same nest can differ dramatically. Judge by the profile and the single node, not by size in isolation. Size narrows the field; shape confirms it.

HERE IS THE PART EVERYONE ELSE SKIPS

That range of worker sizes is not random. Larger workers (sometimes called majors) tend to handle defense and heavier tasks, while smaller workers do more of the interior and brood work.² For you as a homeowner, the practical upshot is simple: seeing a mix of ant sizes trailing together is a hallmark of a carpenter ant colony, and a useful confirmation on top of the profile check. A neat single-file line of identical small ants is more likely a different species entirely.

Color and region — a quick preview

Color varies by species and by where you live. Across the eastern United States the large, uniformly black carpenter ant is the one most people meet; across the West you are more likely to encounter black-bodied species and some with reddish or two-toned coloring.¹ Because the species you have affects details like preferred nesting sites and moisture requirements, Chapter 11 gives you a proper regional field guide. For triage purposes right now, you do not need the species — you need to be sure it is a *Camponotus* and not a termite. If your specimen has the smooth arched profile, a single waist node, elbowed antennae, and (if winged) unequal wing lengths, you are there.

A keeper's honest take

I identify ants for a living, more or less, and I still slow down for the termite check every single time, because it is the one that carries consequences. Everything else — carpenter ant versus field ant versus pavement ant — matters for your curiosity and for choosing the right control method, but none of it will cost you a house. So build the habit: termite question first, always, and only then refine which ant you have. The homeowners who get into real trouble are almost never the ones who misjudged a carpenter ant for a field ant; they are the ones who waved off termites as “just ants.”

The bottom line

Carpenter ants are large, single-node ants with a smooth, evenly arched profile and elbowed antennae, and they come in a range of sizes within one colony. The identification that actually matters is ant versus termite, decided by three quick tells: pinched waist, elbowed antennae, and unequal wings. Nail that, confirm you have a *Camponotus*, and you are ready for the question that determines everything else — why these ants picked your house, which is where we go next.

PART I · REALITY CHECK · CHAPTER THREE

03

Why They Are on *Your* House Specifically

Ants are not attacking your home. They are answering an invitation you did not know you sent — and the invitation is almost always the same three things.

QUICK ANSWER

Carpenter ants come to your house for some combination of three things: **food** (honeydew from aphids on nearby plants, plus sugars, grease, and other insects), **moisture**, and **easy access**.^{1,2,4} Of these, **moisture is the master variable** — it drives both where they want to nest and how attractive your wood is to them.¹ Most homes that draw carpenter ants have at least one damp spot (a leaky gutter, a sweating pipe, wood touching soil, a shaded wet corner) and at least one highway in (a branch touching the roof, a utility line, mulch piled against siding). Remove the invitations and the ants lose most of their reason to be there.

Ants are not moral agents, and they are certainly not out to get you. A house, to a carpenter ant, is just another feature of the landscape — a big structured object with warm spots, cool spots, damp spots, and, if you are unlucky, a few soft pieces of wood that would make a fine nursery. Everything the ants do around your home is a rational response to what your home is offering. That is genuinely good news, because it means you are not fighting the ants; you are editing the offer. This chapter shows you exactly what your house is advertising.

A house is a landscape to an ant

Try to see your home the way a foraging carpenter ant does. It does not perceive “my house” as a single thing to attack. It perceives edges to follow, gaps to

enter, gradients of moisture and temperature, and the scent trails its nestmates have already laid down to good resources.² The siding is a cliff face; the gutter is a river; the branch resting on the eaves is a bridge. When you start reading your house as terrain, the ants' behavior stops looking like an assault and starts looking like what it is — efficient routing between shelter and food.

The moisture connection

If you remember one word from this chapter, make it *moisture*. Carpenter ants strongly prefer to nest in wood that has been softened by water — damp, decaying, or fungus-touched wood is far easier for them to excavate than sound, dry lumber.^{1,3} This is why carpenter ant nests inside structures are so reliably found in predictable damp locations: around leaky windows and door frames, under failing roof flashing, behind gutters that overflow, near chronically damp bathroom and kitchen walls, in sill plates that sit too close to wet soil, and in porch columns and deck posts that wick up rain.⁴

Read that list again, because it is secretly a repair checklist. Every location that attracts a carpenter ant nest is also a place where your house is quietly taking water damage. The ants did not create the soft wood; the water did, and the ants simply found it. This is why I tell homeowners that carpenter ants are often the best moisture inspectors you will ever get for free. Fix the water, and you remove both the nesting habitat and an

underlying problem that would have cost you regardless.

HERE IS THE PART EVERYONE ELSE SKIPS

A can of spray does nothing about moisture. This is the core reason spray-only approaches fail against carpenter ants: even if you kill the visible workers, a house that is still damp remains prime real estate, and either the same colony's satellite nests or an entirely new colony will re-occupy it.¹ Moisture control is not a “nice extra” on top of treatment — for carpenter ants it is frequently the treatment. We build this into a real plan in Chapters 7 and 9.

The food pull

The second invitation is food, and here carpenter ants surprise people. Their single most important food source in nature is not wood and not your pantry — it is honeydew, the sugar-rich liquid that aphids and scale insects excrete.² Carpenter ants actively tend these insects like tiny cattle, protecting them in exchange for the sugar. If your yard has aphid-infested trees, roses, or shrubs, you are effectively running a dairy farm the ants cannot resist, and the trails on your walls may be commuter routes to that farm.

Indoors, the pull is the ordinary stuff: sweet spills, grease near the stove, pet food, and standing water. Carpenter ants also hunt and scavenge other insects, so a house with lots of incidental bugs offers a protein buffet as well.¹ The practical point is that food-driven

visits are usually solvable without touching the ants at all: clean the sugar and grease, manage the aphids on your plants, and the reason to visit evaporates.

THE THREE INVITATIONS — AND HOW TO CHECK FOR EACH

Invitation	Why it draws carpenter ants	Quick check you can do today
Moisture	Softens wood for nesting; provides drinking water	Walk the perimeter after rain. Note gutters overflowing, wet siding, damp crawlspace, wood touching soil.
Food — honeydew	Primary natural food; ants tend aphids/scale	Check trees and shrubs near the house for aphids and sticky leaves. Follow trails to see if they lead to a plant.
Food — indoor	Sugars, grease, pet food, other insects	Inspect under the stove, pantry, pet bowls, and trash for spills and residue.
Access	Bridges and gaps that let ants reach the structure	Look for branches touching the roof, utility lines, mulch against siding, and gaps around pipes and wires.

Highways onto your house

The third invitation is access, and it is the easiest to fix and the most overlooked. Carpenter ants are excellent climbers and will happily use any bridge you give them. A tree branch resting on the roof is a superhighway. So are utility and cable lines, trellises, vines climbing the siding, firewood stacked against the

wall, and mulch or soil mounded up over the bottom edge of the siding.⁴ Where a bridge meets the house, the ants only need a small gap — around a pipe penetration, a worn door sweep, a gap in the flashing — to move from foraging outside to entering inside.

Cutting these bridges does two things at once. It makes it physically harder for foragers to reach the structure, and it removes the sheltered, humid micro-routes that ants prefer. Trimming a branch off the roofline is one of the highest-value, lowest-cost moves in this entire book, and it takes an afternoon.

Why spring especially

Timing matters, and spring is when the phone calls spike. As temperatures rise, colonies that spent the cold months relatively inactive resume vigorous foraging, so ant sightings jump.¹ Spring is also the season when mature colonies release winged reproductives, which is why people suddenly find large winged ants near windows. A burst of spring activity is normal seasonal behavior and, on its own, is not evidence that anything has gone wrong inside your walls. The one spring sighting that *does* warrant concern — winged ants emerging on the *inside* of your home — we flagged in Chapter 1 and will treat fully in Chapter 5.

FOLLOW THE TRAIL BEFORE YOU FIGHT IT

Before any control step, spend fifteen minutes tracing where the ants go. Carpenter ants are most active from dusk into the night, so evening is the best time to watch.¹ If the trail leads away from the house to a tree, stump, or woodpile, your target is out there, not in your walls. If it disappears into the structure at a consistent point, you have just found the entry you will focus on later. Either way, ten cents of patience beats ten dollars of spray.

A keeper's honest take

When I set up a colony deliberately, I give it exactly these three things on purpose: water, a reliable sugar source, and easy access to its nest chamber. Watching how eagerly captive *Camponotus* respond to those inputs taught me how completely their behavior is driven by them. So when a homeowner asks me why the ants “chose” their house, I know it is never personal and never random. The house is offering something. Your entire job in Parts III and IV is to find which of the three invitations you are sending and quietly rescind it. Do that and, in most cases, the ants simply have less reason to come.

The bottom line

Carpenter ants come to your house for food, moisture, and access, with moisture the variable that matters most because it governs both nesting and wood

quality. The trails you see are rational routes to resources, often leading to a tree or shrub rather than your walls. Identify which invitations your house is sending — damp wood, aphid farms, sugary residue, bridges to the structure — and you have the raw material for a real solution. Part II now turns to the question every homeowner is quietly dreading: do these ants actually damage a house, and how would you know?

PART I



References

Sources for Part I. Numbered citations throughout the text refer to this list. The full book carries a consolidated reference section at the back.

1. Hansen, L. D., & Klotz, J. H. (2005). *Carpenter Ants of the United States and Canada*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (Comstock Publishing). — The standard scientific reference on *Camponotus* biology, nesting, foraging range, and structural relevance.
2. Hölldobler, B., & Wilson, E. O. (1990). *The Ants*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. — Foundational reference on ant foraging, polymorphism, trophobiosis (honeydew tending), and caste behavior.
3. Klotz, J. H., Hansen, L., Pospischil, R., & Rust, M. (2008). *Urban Ants of North America and Europe: Identification, Biology, and Management*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. — Applied reference on identification and management of structure-infesting ants, including carpenter ants.
4. University extension guidance on carpenter ants (e.g., Penn State Extension, University of Minnesota Extension, Washington State University Extension). — Consensus homeowner-facing guidance on identification, moisture-related nesting, access routes, and inspection. Specific fact sheets are cited by state in the consolidated references of the full edition.

Last reviewed 2026. This guide summarizes the peer-reviewed and extension literature on carpenter ant biology for homeowners. Where sources disagree or evidence is limited, the text hedges rather than overstates. It is not a substitute for a professional structural or pest inspection.