

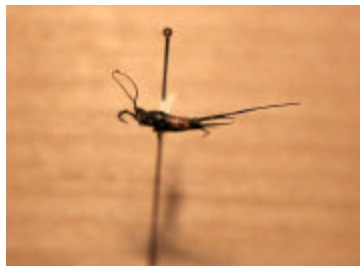
Silverfish and Bristletails by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

Insects in the house are always unwelcome. Some are only a nuisance, but some can be destructive. Silverfish and bristletails will feed on fabrics, especially if the cloth has been starched. For that reason they prefer cotton and linen rather than the wool that clothes moths prefer. They also chew on paper and eat flour and dry cereals. They grow and multiply best in a warm moist environment. They do not have a hard body covering that most insects have so they lose moisture rapidly in a dry environment. Our humid climate provides many favorable habitats for these soft bodied insects. They wander into the drier parts of the house in search of food, usually at night, and retreat to a more favorable environment during the day.

Silverfish are called that because of the shiny, silvery scales that cover their flattened body. The ones we see most commonly are Lepisma saccharina. The species name refers to its preference to starchy foods. Some are called firebrats because they live in the stonework of fireplaces and chimneys. They have long slender antennae on the head and three long threadlike cerci or bristles at the opposite end of the body. The young ones that hatch from the eggs look like miniature adults, they do not have larval forms like caterpillars. They develop slowly and often live for several years, eventually reaching full size at about 3/4 inch long. These little insects do not have wings, but their legs are designed for running and they can move more rapidly. If you try to capture a silverfish you will discover how slippery their smooth, scaly body is.

Bristletails are similar to silverfish, but darker in color and the body is not as flattened. They are not as likely to be seen inside the house as are silverfish. They jump when disturbed, landing as much as a foot away. They feed on algae, lichens and decaying vegetation. You may have seen them in the compost or bark mulch in your garden. If you go for a walk on the beach, you may find them under rocks or hiding in the cracks above the hightide line. They are not likely to do any damage in your house and if they do wander in, they will not remain and lay their eggs there like the silverfish would do. For that reason it is good to be able to tell which are bristletails and which are silverfish.

Information on control of silverfish is found in EB 472.



The Bristletail
3/4 inch long including tail



The Silverfish
5/8 inch long including tail