

## Tree Cattle Aren't Harmful



*Photo by Texas A&M University : Tree cattle or bark lice, the insects that spin this silken web on the trunks of some trees now, are not harmful to the trees.*

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**M**any people are noticing fine silken webbing on the trunks and branches of their trees now. The assumption is that this is a problem, but the insects that cause this webbing are not harmful to trees. They could even be considered beneficial.

The tiny insects that make the webbing are called psocids (pronounced so-cids). They have numerous common names, including tree cattle and bark lice. Basically, they feed on lichen, moss, algae, fungi, spores, pollen and possibly the remains of other insects found on the tree's bark. As a result, they are sometimes referred to as bark cleaners.

Because the webbing appears so suddenly on a tree's trunk or limbs, many homeowners wonder how it got there, where it came from, and if it will damage their tree. The cause for the webbing can be seen if the webbing is pulled from the tree. Underneath you'll see quarter-inch brownish-black insects with some white markings. When the webbing is removed, the insects usually move away in a group and, because of this herding habit, are commonly called tree cattle.

Tree cattle do not damage trees. Some people will see the webbing as it glistens in the sun, walk to the tree and visually inspect it from top to bottom, much closer than they've ever inspected the tree before. It was the webbing that got their attention. Now that they're focusing so closely on the tree, they might notice a dead branch here and there or other imperfections in the tree and then wrongly blame the tree cattle, not knowing what they are. I've talked to homeowners that sprayed their trees with insecticides or that hired pest control businesses to treat the trees as a result of finding the webbing. I even talked to one person that went as far as cutting a tree down because of the assumption that this was some kind of pest that was going to move through the area and kill a bunch of trees.

The adult female psocids lay their eggs in clusters on leaves, branches, and tree trunks. After hatching, the immature insects (nymphs) remain together under their silk webbing. The web material is used as a protection from weather and predators. In the adult stage, the wings of this insect are held roof-like over their body. The nymphs, however, are wingless. Psocids usually have several generations per year in Florida .

## Tree Cattle Aren

After seeing the webbing, some people insist on spraying psocids with insecticides because they are concerned these insects are damaging their trees. But as mentioned, they are just nature's bark cleaners and do not damage trees. If you consider the silk webbing unsightly, a heavy stream of water from a garden hose can be used to wash insects and webbing off infested trees.

If nothing is done, the webbing usually goes away in a few weeks. Psocids can be found on many rough-barked hardwood trees and palms. Most people that I talk to seem to find them on oaks more often than other tree species, though.

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