

WOOD ANTS by Dave and Gill Shearing

You will see Ants everywhere. In the garden, on the pavement and even annoyingly in your house where they can detect anything sweet. But if you go down to your local woods, especially Hockley Woods you will see a very special Ant called the Southern Red Wood Ant.

This Ant is up to half an inch long compared to about a quarter of an inch or less for the usual Black and Red Ants. They are everywhere in the wood in columns going to and fro. Some will be carrying small twigs and others may be carrying dead insects such as Flies, Wasps, or Caterpillars.



Somewhere, up to 100 metres away, will be their nest. Compared to the size of the Ants it will be a colossal structure. Up to a cubic metre. It will consist of a network of underground chambers covered by a huge mound of twigs, soil, moss and Pine needles. There may be as many as 400,000 colony individuals living in one nest. The mound is constantly adjusted by the Ants to maintain a steady internal temperature and to keep rain out. They will make ventilation holes if it gets too hot and add to the mound if it gets too cold.



Wood Ants live in complex social groups made up of 3 groups. A Queen, Workers, and Males. Males mate with the Queen who then produce eggs. Workers, which are all Female are responsible for feeding the colony and maintaining the nest. Around June, young Males and Queens that have developed from the eggs fly from the nest and mate in mid-air. The Males soon die but the Queens shed their wings and set off to form a new nest. From the brief mating she will have enough sperm to fertilize her lifetime supply of eggs.

If a nest is approached or disturbed the workers will squirt Formic acid from their abdomens to ward off an attack. This causes a strong vinegar like smell.

Some species of birds indulge in an activity known as 'anting' where they deliberately squirm about on top of the Ant's nest and allow the Ants to crawl amongst their feathers.



