



# Wyre Forest Study Group

## Discussion

The 2005 Census was slightly more encouraging than of late, with 103 mature adders being recorded, the highest number for some years. This was entirely due to the discovery of 3 good populations in young plantations of Japanese Larch and Corsican Pine planted in 1999 and a mixture of Japanese Larch and Douglas Fir, planted a few years earlier. In each case these plantations were close to existing sites which had previously experienced clear felling, shading out or heath restoration, and as a consequence, a major reduction in adder numbers. There is no doubt that in some circumstances, young conifer plantations are providing necessary havens for reptiles, mainly because the general public and their dogs, mountain bikers and joggers tend to avoid these areas, leaving reptiles relatively undisturbed, apart from the occasional visit by herpetologists.

New plantings now avoid stream valleys and some trees will inevitably fail, leaving open spaces where heather, bramble and bracken growth provide a suitable, if tenuous, habitat

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Chris Bradley, Alonza Garbett, Nigel Hand, Rosemary Winnall, Phil Rudlin, Stuart and Maureen Leadley and Ray Lee for their census work, all those who reported reptile sightings, and the Landowners on whose property the study has been undertaken.

for reptiles. In Wyre Forest, the Forestry Commission is managing these sites taking out individual trees and encroaching scrub from around hibernaculum's and basking spots, to prevent future shading out. Also they have now ceased scarifying on re-stock sites.

English Nature manages the main study area. During the winter of 2005/2006, scrub control was undertaken using chainsaws and the resulting birch stems and brash were stacked neatly. This sensitive approach should prove beneficial to many creatures including adders.

Of much more concern is the fact that so many traditional sites have been lost in recent years. Of 54 sites surveyed in 2005, all of which previously supported adders, only 23 now hold adders and the majority only small island populations. Looking at the habitat breakdown of the 23 sites' supporting adders, 11 (48%) are conifer plantations, proving how important they are to adders but also to other native reptiles, 8 (35%) are scrub and, finally, 4 (17%) are meadows with scrubby hedgerows (see graph opposite).

## The Blood-red Robber Ant *Formica sanguinea* (Nationally Scarce) in Wyre

Mike Bloxham

Wyre is currently the only place in the midlands to host colonies of this fine insect, the main strongholds being in the South of England and Scotland. This article is written to help people recognize the ant so we can find out more about its current distribution and see if its colonies have increased in number, maybe influenced by the current pattern of warmer years.



*Formica sanguinea* worker

Mike Bloxham

This is a large ant - probably the largest British species and it is generally more strongly suffused

with red than the wood ant (*Formica rufa*), the only ant with which it is likely to be confused in Wyre.

It is a slave maker and workers will invade colonies of black ants (*Formica fusca* & *lemanni*), putting the workers to flight and stealing larvae & pupae. Some of these are eaten, but many are allowed to develop and become part of the robber ant colony. They will join in with the robber ants on foraging expeditions to gather nectar from aphids etc so if you see a column of large red ants moving about peacefully in the company of black ones, you will almost certainly have found the target ant. In the same way, a disturbed colony with this mixture will be characteristic.

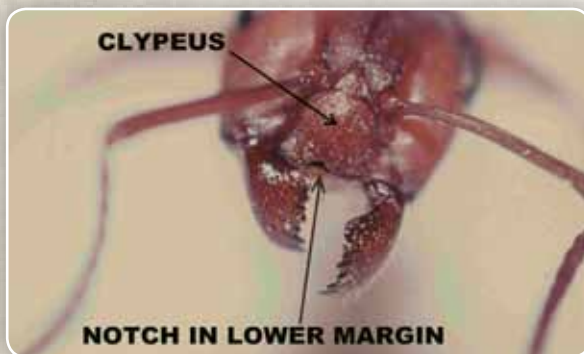
The nests are nearly always situated in open warm sandy areas. South facing slopes are ideal and the fringes of scot's pine plantation (preferably where regular felling takes place) are a good place to look. Old stumps and fallen trunks will sometimes host colonies - those of the common wood ant will usually be covered

with a substantial heap of pine needles, but the colonies of robber ants only have a scanty covering of vegetable debris - they don't make large hills. Nests can often be found in sandy heather clad south - facing ridges adjoining regularly used tracks or paths. They will use all sorts of objects to nest in (or under), having nomadic tendencies.



Mike Bloxham

Wood ants when disturbed, stand upright and blow formic acid at the intruder from the end of the abdomen. The robber ant does not do this, but makes for the intruder to bite and spray the wound with acid. Its powerful jaws are illustrated, as is the characteristic notch on the clypeal margin adjoining them.



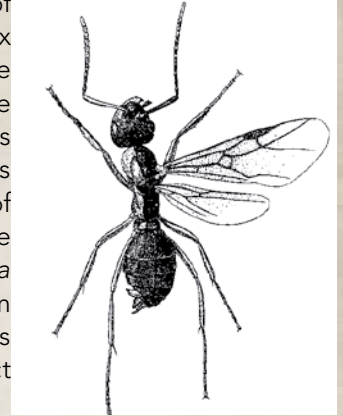
*Formica sanguinea* head

Mike Bloxham

## Historical Notes

The Forest has been attractive to ant hunters for a considerable period of time. Horace Donisthorpe of the British Museum of Natural History, one of the greatest entomologists during the earlier part of the previous century, spent a considerable amount of time in and around Wyre. He records a slave raid on a *Formica fusca* nest on a high railway embankment in Bewdley on July 20th 1908. The robber ants had a nest on the opposite side of the railway and he followed workers laden with larvae & pupae as they crossed the track regardless of the passage of trains. It is interesting to speculate as to the exact whereabouts of this event. It was almost certainly on the Main line (not

the Cleobury branch through the Forest) and may well have been close to the station itself, where several embankments would fit this description. He records having found nests on the borders of hedges at the side of roads in Bewdley and was delighted to find fascinating intersex specimens. His illustration of an ergatandromorph from Bewdley (when one half of the ant is a different sex from the other- e.g. male on the right & worker on the left) is given on the right. His visits took place at intervals until 1919 - a number of strange variations in the adult forms of *F. sanguinea* being discovered by him during this period. It was probably a frequent insect in the area at that time.



More recent times saw Ian Yarrow (friend of Norman Hickin) take an interest in the ants of Wyre and currently Cedric Collingwood (doyen of today's British scholars in the field) still makes occasional visits. In a letter (28th May 88), he mentioned lack of trees and the burning and cutting back of vegetation on the railway embankments that used to take place. This provided ideal hot spots for *F. sanguinea* & several other scarce species in Donisthorpe's day. We both knew of two colonies active at the road junction by the post box at Furnace Mill during 1976. I have returned to check the site at irregular intervals, but found no trace of any colony in summer 2006. Pat & Frank Lancaster found the ant on another site when the last search was initiated. Theirs could be the only surviving colony. Therefore an urgent need to find out more has arisen and members are asked to assist in this task. Collection of larger dead ants seen on a path is always easy and a variety of small containers are always to hand for retention of specimens. If we discover colonies, the Forestry Commission will have quite a simple task to manage the habitat effectively and this could be an important conservation exercise with the Wyre Landscape Project in mind. All open sandy spots near conifers are worth searching and places like the Rifle Range may yield colonies to the diligent searcher going further afield. I shall be happy to receive specimens - good hunting!

## REFERENCE

Donisthorpe, H. St.J. K. 1927. British Ants. Their Life History and Classification 436pp Routledge.

Footnote: The drawing of the ergatandromorph has been copied from page 37 of the above.