A Fanfare for Common Insects

Rock Coppice 8th October 2011

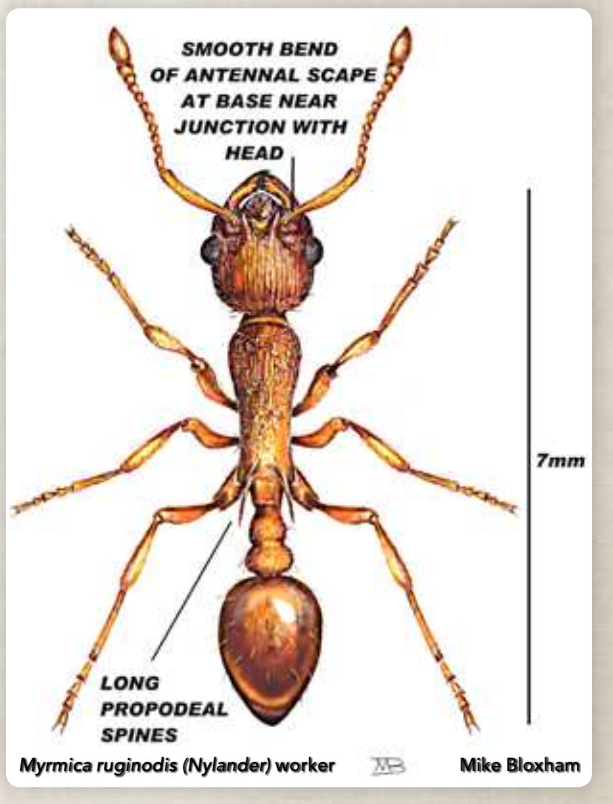
MIKE BLOXHAM

A year of unpredictable weather had produced a range of unfamiliar challenges for wildlife in general and various surprises awaited those attending this meeting. John and Denise Bingham managed to find a number of fungi, although the yield was much smaller than might have been expected in normal autumnal conditions. Many in the party settled down to search not only for fungi, but also for their own special target animals or plants. It was not long before the winged male and flightless female Land Caddis *Enoicyla pusilla* were located, followed soon by the Lemon Slug *Malacolimax tenellus*. Otherwise invertebrate hunters had a quiet day on the whole and were left to enjoy the common insects.

The earlier part of the expedition saw an assortment of these discovered. Beetles included *Notiophilus biguttatus* (a small beetle belonging to a genus noted for enormous eyes and mirror wings), *Pterostichus (Steropus) madidus* – the common 'Black Clock' and *Abax parallelepipedus* (wing case from Brett Westwood). A number of flies were in evidence including the yellow *Suillia atricornis* (often associated with fungi) and several Muscids were noted. These included one of the most common members of the family Muscidae (larvae found in all sorts of conditions and often with predatory tendencies). *Helina evecta* adorns vegetation in all sorts of situations at the beginning and end of the year and no one gives it much attention. See picture below of this lovely insect.

Helina evecta **Mike Bloxham**

The Wasps recorded included a cryptine (this has to go to Germany for identification), and an *Aleiodes* species (that will have to travel to Scotland). Several other small obscure parasitic wasps hovering over a *Formica rufa* nest near the Frank Chapman Centre looked most promising, but an accident happened to a minute specimen handed to me by Mick Blythe. On arrival back at home, it was quickly chilled in the refrigerator and in my enthusiasm to get a preliminary look at it, I forgot that small things get back to the ambient pretty quickly and it suddenly vanished from beneath the microscope. In the period before this, I got a fix on it as likely to be *Trichopria longicornis* - this has been found on *Formica rufa* nests at Weybridge, Surrey. So that lost voucher means that the group will need to find more specimens in future so we have credible evidence for the record.



Myrmica ruginodis (Nylander) **worker** **Mike Bloxham**

As we walked the power line ride back up to the Centre, members discovered a sizeable ant nest associated with dead wood. The ant concerned was *Myrmica ruginodis* (see picture above) and a few notes on its life history are included here.

Distribution

It is almost universal in the Forest, but preferring semi-shaded and damper habitats. It is a common insect in much of northern Europe.

Recognition

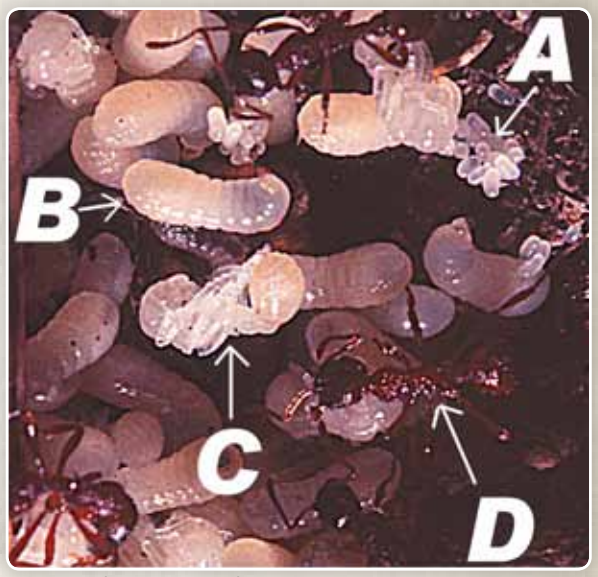
There are not many British species of *Myrmica*. Several are difficult to identify but the abundance of this insect and the combination of characters in the picture (plus a handbook) should enable fairly confident identification.

Nests and colonies

Nests are found in all sorts of situations except very dry open ones. They like decaying logs at the margins of woodland but do not like very dense shade. The ants are often seen out foraging on warm days. They are slower moving than most of the 'black' ants and probably use a combination of light orientation, scent trails and landmark location to get around. The foraging area is not large and most *Myrmica* species will probably locate resources within 10 metres of the nest.

A large nest may contain more than 1000 ants. Several queens may be present, but not all are active in egg laying. Winged sexual forms are produced and usually fly from June to August. Workers do not usually have obvious castes but do change duties as they age (younger ones may tend the young and later go on to forage). They do not eject formic acid as do wood ants, but they sting actively and can irritate those with sensitive skins. The sting of foreign myrmicines can be very painful indeed!

A 'primitive' character is the lack of woven silk cocoons for the mature pupal stages. All the early stages are naked and this makes the insects most rewarding to those studying the entire life history in detail (see photograph). This can be done in a formicarium kept in the house. *Myrmica ruginodis* does well in temporary captivity (collect colonies in autumn by pooter) and seems able to carry on with its normal cycles of reproduction and development unhindered. Winged forms do develop and it is then common to release the colony so freedom for all can be attained. Notes on formicaria are available, but it is very rewarding to make your own models from plaster of Paris with glass observation sheets. Small bore plastic tubing can be inserted for food and water. Various sugars (not white) are often popular.



Myrmica colony A-eggs, B-larvae, C-prepupae, D-imago

Mike Bloxham

Diet

It is omnivorous and tends (and sometimes keeps) aphids for honeydew. It will attack and eat other insects and fresh carrion will also be visited. It collects all sorts of items including seeds.

BASIC REFERENCE FOR IDENTIFICATION

Skinner,J.D.& Allen,G.W.1996. Ants. Naturalists' Handbooks 12. The Richmond Publishing Co. Ltd. 81pp.

Rock Coppice, 8 October 2011, from left Mick Blythe, Jane Scott, Tony Simpson, Cherry Greenway, Paul Reade, Brett Westwood, Fran Flannigan, Dave Scott, Mike Bloxham John Bingham, Peter Koryl, Denise Bingham, Paul Allen, Susan Limbrey, Janet Antrobus, David Antrobus Photo Rosemary Winnall