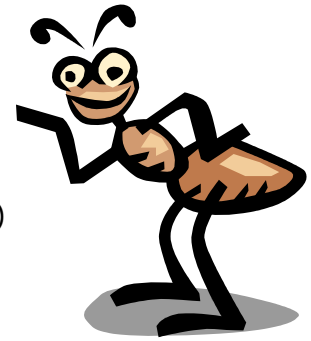


The Great Society: Ants



Many species of the insect Order Hymenoptera (ants, bees and wasps) live in societies with characteristics not much unlike our own. There are working members (farmers, butchers, builders, nannies, soldiers, etc.), the aristocracy (queens and drones), and even thugs and con men living among the productive members. Let's examine the ant societies and the similarities their activities have with our human society.

If we consider the working members of the ant society, we see that there is much specialization for various tasks performed by the worker. Ants with large heads and mandibles are usually soldiers, using their powerful jaws to attack enemies or their large heads to block the entrance of the nest against invaders.

In the leaf-cutting ants, some individuals have the task of caring for the mushroom garden (MG's?), mushrooms being the food of the colony. Medium sized ants gather the leaves and work them into the garden (leaves turn to compost on which the mushrooms grow) and the large workers act as guards and defend the nest. Some workers act as "nannies" to the eggs and larvae. Both eggs and larvae are licked over and over to keep them clean and free of bacteria. They are also put into piles, arranged according to age, and when they larvae pupate, these are taken to other chambers to incubate until the new ants emerge. The nannies also feed the larvae.

In some societies, the worker ants cut up food brought into the nest, in others the food is digested in a "social stomach" and is transferred to the nannies in a liquid form. Some ants mince the food before it is given to the larvae. (Baby food manufacturers?)

At certain times of the year, many of the emerging ants are males and females (winged princes and princesses, if you will). These swarm on prenuptial flights. After mating takes place, there really is no need for the male. He dies. The fertilized queen then sets up a purely female colony of working ants, each with its own tasks to perform. (Amazons?) Some ant nests are composite colonies, consisting of several species sharing the same chambers. This is especially true of the ants that capture slaves and have the slaves doing the majority of work in the nest.

There are thieving ants that live socially with other ants, but sneak into the brood chambers and consume the others larvae and eggs. Highwaymen ants make a nest near another species home and raid the home, stealing foodstuffs (robbery?). Other ants are social parasites, sneaking into another nest and killing the queen. Contact with her body makes them smell like the fallen queen, so the unsuspecting workers feed these ants as they would their own queen. Notice some resemblances (and, of course, differences) to our own society?

