

PICNIC WITH ANTS

Come fly with me.

BY MARK W. MOFFETT

I'm Gerry Blandsides and this is recording tape 18 for my postdoctoral grant 978-2023, *The Geopolitical Significance of the Ants in Namibian Mud Wallows: An Über-synthesis*. It's day nine of my observations on the Pheidole 'big-headed' ant colony nesting east of Otjiwarongo in warthog splash puddle and latrine 62Ω.

07:00 71 ants passed by along their foraging trail in the last minute. Their diet remains unclear, though as before they transport bits of blackened material.

07:02 No change.

7:04 Nothin'.

7:06 Nada.

7:08 Yawn.

7:10 Zzz.

7:12 Kill me.

07:14 I count 69 ants this last minute. An occasional ant hauls a pebble to one of the rings of sand they've let accumulate near the trail border. (Note to self: this pointless activity makes me imagine the ants are as bored as I. *C'est la vie!* For ultimately I shall triumph with my unifying concept of post-Jurassic hypertrophy of ant neosocial metastructure under conditions of intense swine excreta interactivity and its effects on antennal waving dynamics.)

07:16 73 ants per minute. One ant stops, grooms itself. Fly lands on my nose.

07:18 67 ants. (Note: trail usage remains stable, contrary to the conjectures of those bohemian Yale intellectuals with their fancy graph paper. At least this prediction from Appendix 142 of my grant will be borne out? Finishing my count, I give the grooming ant a cheery salute as it turns in my direction.)

07:20 I slap the fly. The ant stops grooming, runs to the moribund bug. It pauses to look at me, then looks at the fly, then at me again, before scurrying off.

07:22 Six ants gather around the fly, start a small fire under it within one of those rings of sand they had deposited earlier. (Note: fly wings crackle as they burn.) The team rotates the fly so that it roasts evenly, turning from a golden dipterous brown

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to a deep smoky grey. (Another note: isn't cooking unique to humans? Follow-up grant assured if this finding is reproducible.)

07:24 The charbroiled scent is driving me crazy. The ants have taken herbs from nearby shrubs, adding the redolence of oregano, but with more vibrant undertones! I pull a sandwich from my field vest, but the baloney disappoints.

Arthrofowl? Miniquail? Souperfly? Kosher-bug? Chicken Little? MicroMcNuggnats? Flying lobster?

17:56 313 ants/minute. 87 little bonfires flicker at my feet in the last glow of sunset. A steady supply of swatted flies — now including crepuscular mosquitoes of the genus *Anopheles* — keeps my ant colony busy. Their recipe improves each time I squash an ant who overcooks. (Note: natural selection in action? I should write a grant on this topic also. Then again, forget the science — boring, boring! Ants that cook, who cares? Future is assured if I replicate this — succulant? aphrodisiant? antbroasia? — recipe without them.)

17:58 The 50/50 split that the ants are giving me seems fair. But still, I calculate I will require thousands of flies to maintain the diet. What must it be like for an elephant to depend on peanuts, handed out one at a time by children? So no more bug repellent for me! Let Bugs Come Hither. Anyway, DEET gives each morsel a decided bitterness, makes the ants queasy as well.

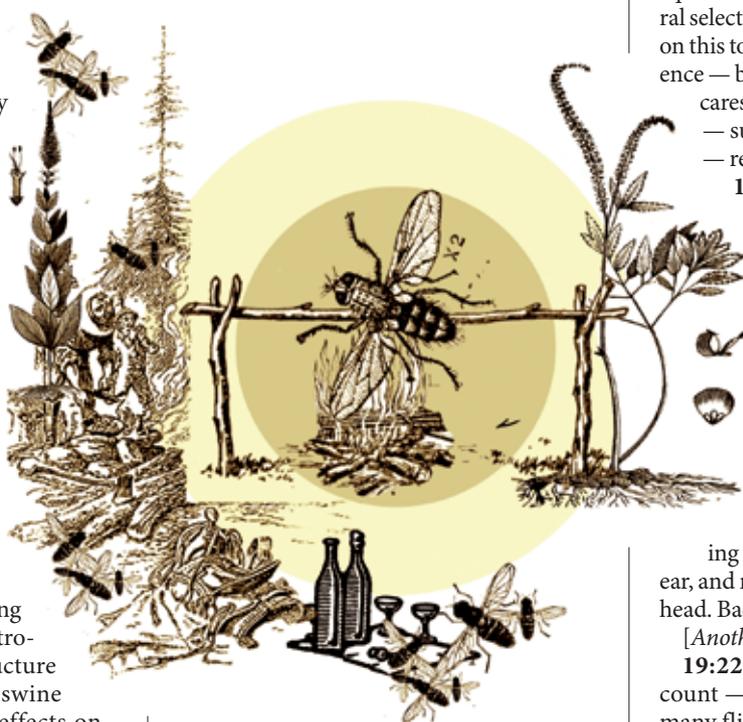
Hold on. More ants are watching me. It seems a fly has landed on my ear, and now there's a mosquito on my forehead. Back in two minutes.

[Another interval of indecipherable static.]

19:22 Too many ants are arriving to count — 4,000 a minute? No matter how many flies I swat, I can no longer keep up with their needs. Worse, the flames below me have merged into a single conflagration that is singeing my hair. My face is blistering; eyes water from the heat. (Note: Stupid bugs, how can they cook anything now? Setbacks like this could cause delays if I decide to approach the Food Network. Wait, look at that! The ants swarm my legs, some of them carrying herbs. It's a recruitment response a thousand times more intense than they show to a fly! Is a different pheromone involved? I will take copious notes, but first I must figure out why I can't move.)

[Recording ends.] ■

Mark W. Moffett is a Smithsonian entomologist who has won the Lowell Thomas Medal from the Explorers Club and the Bowdoin Medal for writing from Harvard. After completing a PhD under E. O. Wilson, he spent years watching ants for his recent book, *Adventures Among Ants*.



07:26 Ants remove fly from fire, carve the smoked meat. (Note: salivating! And if I recall correctly, insects have less fat and more protein than steak.)

07:28 The ant that had been grooming itself — and I'm *certain* it is the same individual — has returned with six others. (Note to self: as with other Pheidole ant species, this recruitment of assistance was doubtless accomplished by use of chemical scent that the leader ant releases into the air. The authority on such pheromones is Professor E. O. Wilson — might he support a field-work project on this?) The newly arrived ant workers lug half the butchered fly in my direction, then they gaze up at me and back away slowly.

Tastes delicious, I knew it would.

[Long interval of static on recording tape.]

... need a seductive marketing name, like the ones restaurants give ugly game fish.