

Conservation Corner

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Go to the ant, you sluggard; Consider its ways and be wise! Proverbs 6:6

Last week, while walking back to the house after chores, Ron noticed that every ant hill he walked by was covered with winged ants. Perhaps you've also noticed winged ants and wondered why, and so today we'll consider the ant.

Ants, of course, are members of the insect class, the most diverse, numerous, and prosperous of all the animals. Insects first appeared on Planet Earth 200 million years ago. Today more than 750,000 different insect species, more than all the other animal groups combined, are found around the world. For example, an acre of soil may contain more than 900 million springtails, and a single female aphid can have 500 billion descendants in a single year.

Ants, along with wasps and bees, are classified in the order Hymenoptera, the most highly evolved order of insects and third largest behind beetles and butterflies and moths. North America is home to over 1,000 species of ants that come in a wide range of sizes and colors. Iowa's common ants include the field, house, grease, carpenter, and pavement ant.

Ants are eusocial insects and colonies may range from dozens to thousands of individuals. Most colonies consist of three castes: one or more large queens, a few small males, and many sterile female workers. Generally speaking, ants are long-lived with life spans of up to 30 years for queens and 1-3 years for most worker ants.

Now for the wings. When conditions are right with bright sunlight, low winds, high humidity, warm temperatures, preferably after 3-5 days of rain, the male and new queen ants in all the colonies in a region will fly out as closely together as possible. Their wings provide distance to help prevent inbreeding while their synchronized nuptial flights increase the chances of finding a mate. The males die soon after mating while the queen lands, removes her wings, and starts a new colony.

Ants are fascinating creatures. Perhaps as a youngster you had an ant farm where you observed their division of labor and strong work ethic. Ants communicate with one another through pheromones, sounds, and touch. Ants are also able to solve complex problems and may be the only group other than mammals that practice interactive teaching.

Ants are beneficial creatures, helping keep pest populations under control and aerating the soil. Ant eggs and larvae are popular in Mexican and Thai dishes. In Laos, our son's kitchen features a "living countertop" of ants.

Ants are also popular creatures, appearing in mythology, books, movies, and video games. In Great Britain, Winged Ant Day is a popular social event.

I'll close with a timeless lesson from Aesop's Fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper." A grasshopper sings the summer away while an ant works hard storing up food for his family. Winter arrives and the grasshopper is dying of hunger. Too late he realizes, "It is best to prepare for the days of necessity."

