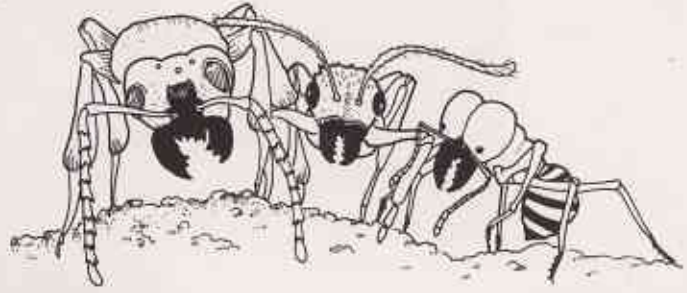


# Urban Antics

## Autumn Invasion

John Hunter



They're everywhere - tens of thousands of the little blighters - and it seems they've got us right where they want us: at home serving up such gourmet delights as crumbs, grains of sugar, discarded lollies or the succulent bodies of household insects.

Who or what you ask?

During summer, your house and garden has been invaded by one of the world's most social and hard-working creatures - the original, down-to-earth Builders Labourers' Federation, ANTS.

Ants developed from wasps more than 100 million years ago and are perhaps the most developed of all social insects. There are 10 000 kinds, most of them a black, brown or rust colour, and they are capable of lifting objects 50 times their own weight. They range in length from 1 mm to about 2.5 cm.

They are invertebrates, which means they have no backbone. Instead, they have an exoskeleton - an armour-like shell which protects their internal organs.

Ants live underground in a maze of tunnels and rooms, make slaves of fellow ants, grow food in strange ways and march in armies much the same as humans do. However, they do not think about these things. They follow highly-developed inherited instincts without knowing why.

It is these instincts which warn them that their summer reign is over. With autumn's shorter days and cooler nights, the mad rush to stock up on food for winter begins in earnest.

In our office lunchroom recently, I noticed one tiny ant doing battle with a breadcrumb ten times its size. Unable to handle it alone, I knew it would call on its mates for help. By emitting an odour, it can leave a trail for the reinforcements waiting outside to follow.

In this situation, it's best to help the intruder otherwise you risk a full-scale invasion.

Most autumn days in Western Australia are warm and sultry. It's a time when people and ants clash in the garden. Don't lie on the lawn too long without shifting, otherwise you'll get bitten, usually where it hurts most.

Another favourite ant trick is to enter your garden trickle system through the tiny outlets, quench a thirst and then get stuck. Take extra care when you check the nozzles to clear a blockage. I've often been smacked in the face by a sudden release of decomposing body parts. Take my word for it - it's not a pleasant experience.

Many gardens today also feature old railway sleepers which harbour termites and shiny, fat, foreign-looking brown ants from remote areas of the State. When they break out to recolonise or seek new food sources, and a local ant colony finds the nest entrance, a battle royal ensues.

As a boy, the ants around my house gave me many a biology lesson. Insects were dissected and lizards skeletonised; an awesome yet educational experience.

Even today, on vacant blocks or in parks, one can still find a nest of dreaded "Sergeant Ants" - each beast 2.5 cm of rust-red fury with mandibles like crab claws and a sting in the tail which inflicts excruciating pain. In my younger days, I often paid the price for interference.

Ants are certainly worth studying. Look for them, and watch them, in your garden. You'll be fascinated.



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## EDITORIAL

A prerequisite for the successful management of land and wildlife is an understanding of the processes that drive ecosystems, and managers who can manipulate these processes.

In Western Australia, we are fortunate that we have a wealth of talent in different government agencies, tertiary institutions and private companies who can provide these research and management skills.

Of course, obtaining a perfect understanding of ecosystems and ways to manage them brings to mind the frog who wants to reach a creek, but can only jump half the distance every time.

But it is not the complexities of understanding or managing ecosystems which provide the greatest difficulty.

Social and political factors are far more difficult to accommodate.

All the scientific and managerial skills in the world are worth nothing if the community and, often more importantly, selected constituencies within the community do not support the management strategies.

Unfortunately, there is often an inverse relationship between a scientist's or manager's skills in his profession and his capacity to handle social and political factors in the community. This is not surprising, since most scientists and managers have received little training in basic communication skills, let alone community politics.

CALM is attempting to address this problem in a variety of ways. But the people who should know the most about how to obtain community support for public land management strategies are the public. *Landscape* readers are an important and influential constituency. If you have thoughts on this issue we would like to hear from you.



*What a sterling idea! A new management plan for CALM's South Coast Region - page 28.*



*Are insects gradually eating away our jarrah forests? Turn to page 18.*



*What lies beneath the waters of Marmion Marine Park? See page 25.*

## COVER




*A rose by any other name... Does its name detract from the beauty of the common eggfly (Hypolimnastis bolina)? Photograph - Jiri Lochman*

## FEATURES

- FIREWOOD - THE BURNING ISSUE**  
BY STEVE SLAVIN 4
- KARRI FOR KEEPS**  
BY ROGER UNDERWOOD & BARNEY WHITE 6
- OUT ON A LIMB**  
BY IAN ABBOTT 18
- AUTUMN COLOURS**  
BY ROGER UNDERWOOD 22
- DIVER'S DIARY**  
BY GREG POBAR 25
- JEWEL OF THE SOUTH**  
BY JOHN WATSON 28
- THE PRICE OF POPULARITY**  
BY CHRIS HAYNES 35
- IN SEARCH OF...**  
BY BERT & BABS WELLS AND BRIAN HAY 40
- IT'S A ... DOLPHIN !**  
BY ROSELYNN LANG 44
- SWEET RETREAT**  
BY CAROLYN THOMSON & KIM WILLIAMS 46
- PIECING TOGETHER THE REMNANTS**  
BY KEVIN KENNEALLY & NORM MCKENZIE 50

## REGULARS

- PORTFOLIO** KIM PERRIER 13
- URBAN  ICS** 24
- BUSH TELEGRAPH** 33
- ENDANGERED** THE LESSER NODDY 53
- LETTERS** 54
- SPECIALS**
- PHOTO COMPETITION** 16

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