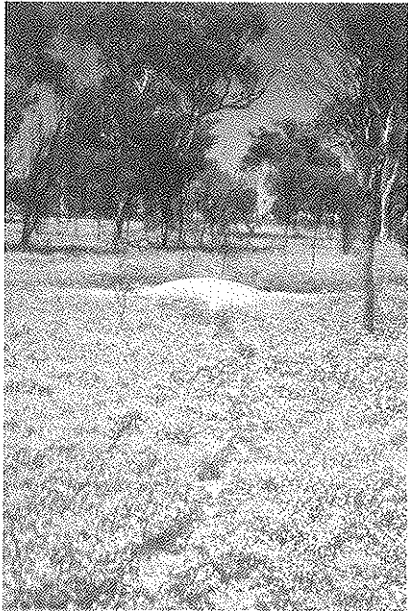


Bush detective

Who made this trail?



Smooth clear trails such as this are often visible in bushland, running for 100m or more, like this one in everlastings. Who made it?

A close inspection reveals the answer – they are meat ant highways, leading from the nest site to foraging areas. These neat and tidy roadways are

formed by tens of thousands of ants going out to work each day. They even have inward and outward lanes marked, but by scent instead of white lines.

As you can see from the anthill behind, the nesting colonies can become very large and may form satellite colonies nearby.

Meat ants (*Iridomyrex purpurea*) are predators and scavengers that scour a wide area around their nest. They sense movement from vibrations in the ground and will sally forth to catch prey or attack an enemy. There can be few people in southern Australia who have never, at some time, poked a stick in a meat ant's nest, just to watch them boil out of the nest entrances and race ferociously around. But don't get in the way! They bite rather than sting, but half a dozen or so running up your leg under your jeans, biting as they go, can be the cause of quite spectacular bush dances! (I once saw a large number run up a horse's leg – for several minutes he imitated a buck-jumping champion!)

Meat ants are native, but they have increased enormously in numbers, as hard ground (such as gateways and tracks) are ideal for their nests. When they are in very large numbers (as they often are around the edges of remnant patches in farming areas) they can adversely affect the ecology of the bushland by removing a very high proportion of the litter fauna essential to proper cycling of plant and animal debris.

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