

ANTICS

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In summer of 2007 we began to notice large numbers of little black ants that periodically invaded our kitchen, particularly during unsettled weather.

In January 2008, the invasions had become so bad that specimens were collected and dispatched to the Department of Agriculture and Food's Pest and Disease Information Service for identification. The ant was identified as an *Iridomyrex* species, a relative of the commonly encountered meat ant *Iridomyrex purpureus*.

Then, on 18 April 2008, a walk in the bush that surrounds our homestead led to the discovery of an open trapdoor spider burrow and a line of little black ants nearby led to the body of a shield-backed trapdoor spider *Idiosoma nigrum*. Identity of the spider was confirmed by the WA Museum. It was thought that the unfortunate spider was probably a juvenile that may have been forced to vacate its burrow because of invading ants. It did not get far before being overcome!

Talking to other landholders in the Waddy Forest area east of Coorow revealed that all had been having trouble with little black ants. Interestingly, the little black ants appear to have displaced their larger meat ant relative in garden and bush areas around homesteads.

A most disturbing account came from Alison Doley about live Carnaby's cockatoo chicks being adversely affected by the little black ants. These cockatoos breed on Alison's property, Koobabbie.

In the 2008 breeding season, monitoring revealed that live chicks in three out of 36 active nests had been invaded by little black ants. Previous observations suggested that ants only invaded nests when there was a dead chick.

This was the story provided by Alison from Carnaby's nest 24 and nest 59.

In nest 24 on 4 December 2008, the chick had ants on it and was showing signs of distress. Around the opening of the cloaca the skin was reddened and scabby. Dejan Stojanovic, Conservation Officer for the Carnaby's Black Cockatoo Recovery Project, obtained some chlorpyrifos and sprayed the base of the salmon gum. By 15 December the chick had recovered completely and showed its good health and appreciation by hissing aggressively! By 15 January 2009 the chick had fledged.

In nest 59 on 21 December 2008 there was a one-week-old chick and a dead chick with some ants on it that was removed. On 23 December a light application of



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chlorpyrifos was sprayed around the base of the tree. On 15 January 2009 the chick was healthy. On 19 February at 7pm the chick was at the mouth of the nest, obviously troubled by ants. Eventually it glided to the ground. Little black ants were on its tongue and through its feathers. It did not have a full crop. The chick was placed in a York gum that was free of ants and the parent birds were observed feeding it. Next morning there was no sign of parents or chick. In the 2009 breeding season ant control on active nests will be given top priority.

Landholders have various theories in regard to the increasing numbers of 'little black ants'. Perhaps the adoption of minimum till in cropping systems has created favourable conditions for this species of ant, or maybe it is seasonal conditions experienced in recent times, particularly the dry years of 2006-07?