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Book review

NARENDRA, A. & KUMAR, S.M. 2007: On a trail with ants: A handbook of the ants of Peninsular India

Published by Ajay Narendra and Sunil Kumar M., Bangalore, 193 pp.
(US\$ 35.-, 20 % student discount; order at antbook.india@gmail.com)

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If myrmecologists are to convince others that our work is as interesting and useful as we think it is, we have to learn to break out of academic discourse and grab people. *On A Trail With Ants* colourfully leads the charge in Asia, also treating India's ants in one volume for the first time since BINGHAM (1903).

On A Trail With Ants is more than a regional handbook. The first half introduces various facets of ant biology, the second giving accounts of 50 of the better-known Indian species. India-centred, the first half also draws on examples from outside Asia as it tells us of ant life history, nesting, feeding, eusociality, mutualisms, mimicry, conservation evaluation and captive observation. Two ants – *Harpegnathos* spp. and *Oecophylla smaragdina* – star in chapters symbolising athletic individualism and cooperative nest-weaving, respectively. A body design section explains function along with structure, and the species accounts convey a load of information efficiently in pictures and words. Here alongside the concise text the accounts are punctuated with neat boxes of laboriously-accumulated ecological information, in symbols explained on the inside cover.

The book contains no key to species or genera, but a handy one-page illustrated key to subfamilies (p. 114) will be appreciated by beginners. The authors have been bold in their identifications, and have been alerted to a few errors – being no taxonomist, and new to Indian ants, I won't risk compounding these with my own. The priority must be genus identification, and I can think of no more useful book in Asia in this regard. The authors seek to share not only their understanding of ants but also their excitement. A great strength is the attractive layout, and pictures which are "functional" at worst and often outstanding. There is a welcome tone of respect for individuals and colonies (though this may in parts give beginners a false impression of the ease of field identification!). Reading through *On A Trail* will awaken wonder in even a seasoned myrmecologist. Here we are meeting real, living organisms, not the pinned specimens of many regional guides.

An advantage of a self-published book is that the authors can bypass the peer-review filter, and throw in a great deal of their own observations. This is valuable, and I learned a lot more from it than I would have from a bunch of scientific papers. The downside is that we don't know

how well backed-up they are. Species don't really fit into neat boxes, and some classifications (temporary versus permanent nests, endemic versus cosmopolitan) conceal a spectrum. Still, I found the book full of insights that slotted neatly into place beside my experience: that *Pachycondyla rufipes* is a canopy-gap specialist; that *O. smaragdina* was used to control orchard pests in Kerala, as elsewhere; that it is replaced by *Anoplolepis gracilipes* in degraded forests (challenging the assumption elsewhere in Asia that *Oecophylla* itself indicates disturbance); and many more.

Most scientists find it hard to write for non-scientists; we run into tension between precision and accessibility. This tension is sometimes felt in *On A Trail*, e.g., on p. 39 where the buoyant chapter heading *It is Always "Us", Never an "I"!* sits above a dry academic figure caption. The informal, quirky style often enriches the book, like chatting with an enthusiastic teacher. Some chapter titles though are enigmatic: would you have predicted that *Mixing Business with Pleasure* is on coevolution and mutualisms? And sometimes the loose language misleads: ants don't "outweigh all organisms in the tropics" (p. 1) or "dominate every single habitat in the world", or habitually "care for distant relatives of the colony" (p. 3). "Morphological communication" is used where "tactile communication" would be clearer, and "polydomic" should refer to multiple nests, not to nests having multiple entrances (p. 16). The statement that it's "only the primitive ants that are exclusive hunters" (p. 26) is soon contradicted. "The longevity of the pheromones released must be decided" (p. 32) means, I take it, a "decision" by natural selection, but cognition might be inferred by the less wary student. "The Weaver Ants have evolved exceptionally well" may also confuse – it's hard to find an extant species that's evolved badly. Spelling errors are rife, and the book's errata list is very incomplete. These points amount perhaps to a single oversight: they should have got an editor!

In keeping with the desire to engage widely there is a welcome first stab at giving common English names to Indian ants, largely adapted from ANDERSEN (2002). But there are omissions, and problems, like the "Pale Yellow Cannibal Ant" (*Cerapachys parva*), shown in text and image to be brownish red. Even Alan Andersen's more systematic effort deserves discussion before wider uptake; we could learn from the elegance of regional works naming birds (INSKIPP & al. 1996) and dragonflies (WILSON 2003).

For all its foibles, *On A Trail With Ants* is a vibrant celebration of the Indian myrmecofauna; Ajay Narendra and Sunil Kumar deserve congratulations for their courage as well as their groundbreaking achievement. Will it attract people to studying ants? Without doubt. The book is far

less intimidating, financially, intellectually and physically, than HÖLLDOBLER & WILSON (1990) (which helped lure this reviewer as it did the authors), and is more tailored to Asia. Alongside Himender Bharti's website, <www.antdiversity.com> it throws open the field of Indian myrmecology. I hope it will be sold, perfected and re-issued, and look forward to the authors' future projects. Colonel Bingham should be delighted.

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