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Book review

MOFFETT, M.W. 2010: *Adventures among ants: a global safari with a cast of trillions*

University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 288 pp; Hardback, ISBN: 9780520261990, Price: USD 29.95, £ 20.95

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Let me start with the obvious: *Adventures among ants* is the most visually stunning ant book ever published.

The physical product, from glossy paper to the tasteful font, is an aesthetic *tour de force*. The photographs are ... well, this is a Mark MOFFETT book, and unless you've been hiding under a rock for the past two decades – a reasonable place for a myrmecologist, I suppose – you'll know that MOFFETT is the National Geographic photographer responsible for much of that magazine's insect imagery from the 1980s onwards. The photographs are spectacular. The retro cover suggests 1950's era pulp movies and would itself make a fine poster. You'll be glad you bought this book even if you never read a word of it.

But read it you will, because MOFFETT is also a born storyteller. Therein lies the book's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The layout, loosely structured in sections around *Pheidologeton*, *Eciton*, *Dorylus*, *Oecophylla*, *Polyergus*, the attines, and *Linepithema*, covers the usual technical ground about insect societies and social behavior. The effortless prose flows playfully across the dozens of natural history examples that frame discussions on group foraging, the superorganism concept, ant agriculture, and other topics.

At heart, *Adventures* is a good read not because it covers these subjects but because it conveys, in a very human manner, why they are so fascinating. It is not about ants so much as a travelogue around the author's experience of the ants. We learn about foraging strategy, for example, as part of a larger narrative of MOFFETT's graduate research aspirations. The book allows us to eavesdrop on MOFFETT's mental explorations, and that in turn gives the uninitiated reader a comfortable angle from which to approach what would normally seem an alien world.

Adventures among ants is not aimed at professional myrmecologists. The readership of *Myrmecological News* should already be familiar with much of the scholarly content and may not find much use for the book other than as coffee table art. Indeed, ant specialists are liable to be frustrated with MOFFETT's sometimes selective take on the literature and his willingness to dispense with rigor in the face of a compelling tale.

I'll give two examples where *Adventures* might disappoint the scientifically-inclined. The first involves the *Allomerus*-as-ambush-predator story (DEJEAN & al. 2005), where workers wait in porous fungal galleries to grab passing

arthropods. MOFFETT is understandably skeptical and devises a field test of the hypothesis (pp. 94-95). The result? Nothing. The ambush behavior never appeared across numerous replicates. It's a striking finding, seeming to refute a widely-cited study, yet MOFFETT undercuts his credibility by choice of venue. Rather than submit to the peer-reviewed literature, he presents his experiment only in the book as a couple of chatty paragraphs and an endnote.

A second example repeats MOFFETT's cleaner-ant hypothesis that first appeared in National Geographic in 2007. On observing Sonoran *Dorymyrmex* swarming *Pogonomyrmex* workers at their nest, MOFFETT interprets the Pogo's behavior as intentional, seeking the cleansing services of the little dolichoderines as a reef fish does with their cleaner wrasse. This story surfaces on page 190, an intriguing idea, but one that has never been experimentally assessed or reviewed by an appropriate journal. *Adventures* holds other examples of storytelling gone amok, but I'll leave them be.

Yet such criticisms miss the bigger picture. *Adventures* isn't meant as a comprehensive review of ant biology. Rather, the book is unmistakably a tour through MOFFETT's world. The constant presence of the author in the prose should make that point of view clear enough. If MOFFETT sees ants acting as terrestrial cleaner wrasses, that's what we see. It's a guided cruise around the formicosphere, formed on the narrator's experience. That's a strength of the book and a large part of its charm; those who do not want a guided tour probably shouldn't sign up for this one.

The result of such a personable account is that *Adventures among ants* is the most approachable ant book for the lay audience since HÖLLDOBLER & WILSON's (1994) *Journey to the ants*. Myrmecologists would be wise to look beyond the occasional technical flaw to see this beautiful volume for what it is. After we're done drooling over the photographs, the book is something we can hand to all those people who ask "Ants? Why study ants?"

If someone can't pick up Mark MOFFETT's enthusiasm for our little formicid friends, they are almost certainly hopeless.

Disclaimer: I had a small role in the production of this book, assisting MOFFETT in the field for parts appearing in Chapter 12, and I reviewed a manuscript version.

References

- DEJEAN, A., SOLANO, P.J., AYROLES, J., CORBARA, B. & ORIVEL, J. 2005: Arboreal ants build traps to capture prey. – *Nature* 434: 973.
- HÖLLDOBLER, B. & WILSON, E.O. 1994: *Journey to the ants: a story of scientific exploration*. – Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 304 pp.