

Book review

HÖLLDOBLER, B. & WILSON, E.O. 2010: *The leafcutter ants: civilization by instinct*

W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 160 pp., Paperback, ISBN 978-0-393-33868-3, Price: USD 19.95

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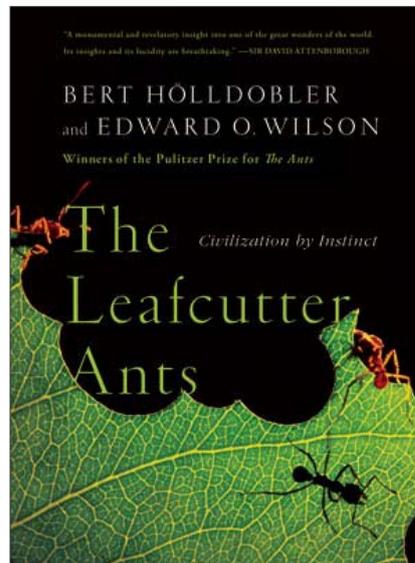
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It is impossible to discuss the ant books of HÖLLDOBLER and WILSON without reference to their Pulitzer Prize-winning magnum opus, *The ants*. I remember reading *The ants* cover to cover the summer before starting my masters, at the isolated Cranberry Lake Biological Station in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. Although *The ants* was probably not meant to be read straight through, being heavy and difficult to hold for extended periods of time, I had copious spare time and few distractions, allowing me to complete it and to absorb some of the authors' encyclopedic knowledge in time to start my first ant research.

Aside from a wealth of knowledge about every known aspect of ant biology, *The ants* profiled several fascinating taxa in chapters at the end of the book. The fungus-gardening ants were one of these groups, and reading about them eventually led me to work on leafcutting ants for my doctoral dissertation. The current book, *The leafcutter ants* is the latest and most up to date expansion of the earlier work.

Writing a book about fungus-gardening ants must be a challenging endeavor, given the rapid rate of publications over the past two decades. By the time a book hits the press, it will invariably be missing some important discoveries. I certainly felt that way about the fungus-gardener chapter in *The ants*. Whereas I have continued to use the rest of the book as an invaluable reference tool for my research, I hardly ever glance back at the chapter on fungus-gardeners. Today, it is missing so much new data as to be virtually obsolete. So, I have been looking forward to the latest update.

Unlike *The ants*, *The leafcutter ants* does not have obsessive graduate students as its target audience, and one should not read it with the expectations of finding the latest, most comprehensive update on the leafcutter ants. To be sure, it is greatly expanded with material that has been published in the past 15 years since *The ants*. However, *The leafcutter ants* emphasizes readability rather over the density of scientific content, and much of the book is a gen-



tle stroll through the world of the leafcutters, rather than a systematic exploration. *The leafcutter ants* is one third pictures, most of them excellent photographs from Alex Wild, with some famous photographs from the Hölldobler lab. The narrative style is more conversational, rather than fact-filled. *The leafcutter ants* is definitely an easy read that is not aimed at the myrmecologist, but rather at a more general scientific audience, explaining some of the myrmecologist's passion.

Although I have greatly enjoyed reading the book, and ogling the beautiful photos, a part of me wants the comprehensive fungus-gardener reference that will serve as the cornerstone of attine research, one that focuses on the cutting-edge discoveries and debates. But is it possible to write such a book today? Probably not, given the accelerating pace of research in this field, and the admittedly limited market niche. But perhaps books are no longer the best format for this sort of material. Rather, knowledge can be better summarized in wiki-based repositories built by the community, which can remain up to date and relevant continuously. Although the current academic system does not reward individual scientists for investing into such endeavors, perhaps, as well-acknowledged masters, HÖLLDOBLER and WILSON could lead the way. What if the next version of *The leafcutter ants* would exist as a beautifully written community-maintained online reference?