

THE BACK PORCH RANGER

by Melissa Kay Bishop

I grew up on the plains of Plano, Texas. My parents built a new house in a new neighborhood that had previously been a wide open expanse that had previous owners. Among the prairie inhabitants, were some of the 12,000 species of ants that roam the earth. Among those ants, unfortunately, were fire ants, who apparently had a neighborhood of their own precisely under the spot where we placed our built-in laundry hamper. More than once, as I was slow to learn as a child, when I couldn't find any clean pants, I would retrieve a slightly dirty pair from the hamper. It wasn't until after I zipped up my Levis, that I was told by painful stings, that 20 fire ants had already claimed my pants.

If you have ever been

stung by a fire ant, you would remember as it feels more akin to a hornet sting than your average bug bite. The reason for this may very well be that it is a sting rather than a bite. A fire ant will bite your skin and grip it in its demon-like pinchers while pulling the abdomen forward to inject a little acid into the wound. They then will delight in spinning in a circle, biting and injecting as they go. Sinister little buggers.

It is not only their sting that is akin to the bee, but their lifestyle as well. They live in social colonies that are ruled by a queen, whose job it is to mate and lay

eggs. The males are kept around simply to help out with this process and die once their job is done. The rest of the ants in the colony are infertile female worker ants.

Since there are so many species of ant, these social customs can vary from



Biting Fire Ant

group to group. Some species might have more than one queen and the female workers might actually be fertile. On occasion you may spot an ant with wings that many often mistake for a termite, but they

Fire Ants in the Pants

are actually special ants. They are males and females who have developed wings to enable them to fly away from their colony to meet up with other winged ants from other colonies to mate and help deepen the gene pool. They somehow know to all fly at the same time and when they swarm, they meet up at the tallest point in the vicinity. This is called "hill topping."

Ants are also like bees in their way of communication. They probably pass the word that it is time to fly, or where the closest family picnic is taking place, by their own way of communication. They leave pheromones for other ants to follow a trail and they touch antennae to send messages to one another. They cannot actually "speak" or

make any vocalizations because besides the absence of a voice box, they also have no lungs. They breathe through tiny holes all over their body.

As unpleasant as they are to live with, ants are actually kind of interesting from afar. They have been on Earth for over 100 million years and have placed themselves on almost every continent. Luckily, they have their good points. They will protect a garden against aphids, white flies, and mealy bugs. They also rid your home of caterpillars, fleas, and termites. Not that you would want them in your house for this purpose.

There are many baits and poisons on the market to rid your home of the little devils, but there are many traditions of protecting against ants that were lost through the industrial and chemical revolutions. Your great-grandmother probably used one of the follow-

ing methods: Spreading cucumber peels where ants enter the house or cayenne pepper, cinnamon, powdered charcoal, bone meal, talcum powder, or chalk. It is also helpful to plant deterrents such as spearmint, peppermint and pennyroyal.

In a pinch, do what I did when I found a militant trail entering my house to invade my kitchen. I placed a lollipop at the beginning of their trail, which stopped them from going any further as they believed they had hit the mother lode. It's called the "Give Them What They Want" method.

Melissa Kay Bishop is a journalist and wildlife hobbyist living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. After years of volunteering and working with creatures great and small, she now chronicles the ones who visit her own yard. She can be reached at backporchranger@gmail.com.

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