

## Ants on Horsell Common

The most easily found and interesting species on the Common is the Wood Ant. It occurs around the eastern edge and towards the west end and is immediately recognizable because it makes mounds of vegetable debris often several feet wide and often equally high. The individual workers vary in size, but some are 10 mm long and among the largest of British ants.

The function of the mound is to maintain temperatures (up to 20 degrees) higher than the surrounding air because, like us and many insects, they need high body temperature for growth and development - the mound acts like a duvet retaining the heat produced by their activity. There are many interesting heat seeking invaders which are harboured by Wood Ants in these nests and they even include another species of ant - the very small Inquiline Ant.

Wood Ants also have the characteristic behaviour of rearing up and squirting formic acid at intruders - be careful not to get this in your eyes! Their main foods are "honeydew" which provides sugar for energy and is produced by aphids on trees and they also eat insects for protein to enable growth and reproduction. Eggs are laid by queens which do not forage for food and, unlike honeybees, there may be dozens in one nest. No eggs, larva or pupa are present in mid-winter, but in early spring (or often late winter) the ants mass on the nest surface in sunny periods and egg-laying starts then. In large nests winged males and young winged queens can hatch from cocoons in May or June, having passed through a legless larva stage. They fly to sunny spots to mate and the new queens enter nests without any attempt to start a new nest by themselves although groups of them are occasionally found and these could possibly be the foundation of completely new nests. Eggs that are laid later develop into workers and at summer temperature they can grow from egg to adult within a month.

Most (perhaps all) new nests are produced by subdivision of large ones. This makes the species very vulnerable to habitat loss because it does



*Wood Ant 5-11 mm long reddish-brown colour, forms large colonies under huge mounds of plant material. Will spray formic acid at people if disturbed.*

*Shown approx. 4 times life size.*

not invade new woodland and it is easily destroyed by agriculture or building development. Some European countries have given it legal protection because it destroys tree pests and it can be introduced fairly easily for this purpose. Conservation here is important anyway if we are not to see continual decline of an interesting animal.

There are several smaller ant species on Horsell Common and these have many differences from the Wood Ant. For example: none of them squirt formic acid, although a few can produce it, and it is **not** a substance commonly produced by ants. Some ants can sting like bees, but the British ones only produce mild results on our thick skins. Many species can make small temporary mounds of earth over their nests, but do not make the very large mounds of vegetable material. Their other features are also various so generalisations can be misleading in a short article, but I would be willing to help keen entomologists with further information and identification.

If this brief account stimulates interest then further reading can be recommended. An encyclopaedic account of the ants of the world simply entitled "The Ants" by Holldobler and Wilson (Springer-Verlag) is expensive, but well worth borrowing from a library. At the other end of the scale a small paperback "Ants" by Skinner and Allen (Richmond) may be found helpful.

John Pontin

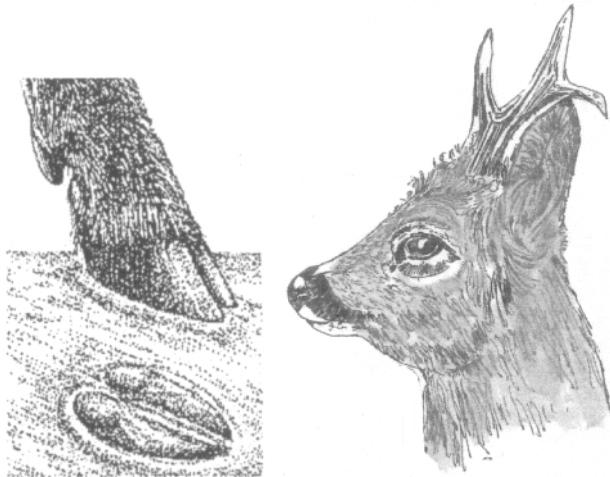
*Dr. Pontin is an ecologist who advises the Society on how to look after the Common. He is also a committee member and has a special interest in ants.*

## Foot and Mouth disease closes Common

The outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease has led to the closure of car parks and users have been asked not to walk or ride on the Common for the time being.

Foot and Mouth disease is very infectious and can be caught by any animal that has cloven hoofs. Deer which have cloven hoofs roam on all parts of the Common. As a wise precaution, and on the advice of the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF), the decision was taken to close the Common.

If the disease were to infect the deer they, and much of the other wildlife, would have to be slaughtered. Scotchers Farm on the edge of the Common also has a large dairy herd, which could become infected, and as a good neighbour we would not want to put the animals at risk.



Deer have cloven or split hoofs. Roe Deer roam on the Common, they are very shy and stay hidden during the day. You can find evidence of their droppings and footprints on soft ground.

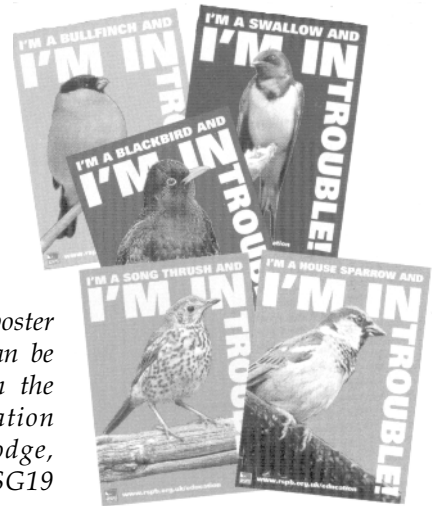
## Students work hard!

Students from Woking High and Fullbrook Schools have been helping to conserve the heathland areas of the Common as part of their Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award. They have been taking part in the Surrey Wildlife Trust working parties which are organised the second Sunday of every month.

Working parties are scheduled during the winter months so that work does not disturb birds and animals during their breeding season. The March session was cancelled because of the closure of the Common but sessions will resume again in October.

## "I'm in trouble"

Some of Britain's best loved song birds are in decline. The RSPB have produced a set of posters for 5-11 year olds. Titled "I'm in trouble" and featuring the song thrush, blackbird, swallow, bullfinch and house sparrow they explain what is happening.



Each A2-size poster costs £2 and can be purchased from the RSPB, Education Dept. The Lodge, Sandy, Beds SG19 2DL.



## The return of Jarvis

*Jarvis the Nightjar will be flying back to Horsell Common after spending the winter in Africa*

We have adopted Jarvis the nightjar as our mascot for the Common because it is a very special bird. Nightjars are specialist heathland birds. *The State of the UK's Birds 1999* produced by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) shows that for many years their numbers were in serious

decline. More recently there has been an increase, this is due in some part to the regeneration of heathland. The conservation work carried out on Horsell Common has played a small part in this success story.

Nightjars are very difficult to see as they fly at night so in order to find out the numbers singing males are counted. If you go out onto the heathland areas of the Common during late May, about half an hour before dusk, you may just be lucky enough to hear one. The song of the male is very distinctive and not very bird like. It has been likened to a sewing machine or a two stroke engine, you cannot mistake it.