

The Ants Go Marching

CAN YOU IMAGINE being able to lift a car or a piano with your bare hands? You don't have to become Superman to do it; you just have to become a human-sized ant! Ants are able to lift 10-15 times their own weight. That means that if you were 100 pounds, with the strength of an ant you could lift 1,000-1,500 pounds. That's the weight of a grand piano or a small camper trailer!

There are 12,000 known species of ants in the world, with 1,000 found in North America.

In western Canada where I live (and throughout the western U.S.) there are ants called western thatching ants that build a roof of thatch, made with pine needles, pieces of grass, and sticks, to protect their hills from the elements. They even mow the grass in and around their ant hill to regulate the temperature. When it is cool in the spring you can see that the grass has been nipped off just above the ground. This is by the ants themselves. With no grass, the warmth of the sun can reach the hill and keep them going. If you return to the same ant hill in the heat of the summer you will see that the grass surrounding (and sometimes inside) the ant hill is long and lush. This provides shade from the hot summer sunshine so their home doesn't overheat.

Have you ever seen an ant highway? In a park close to my home there are ant highways all across the lawn. Talking to the locals, I learned that those highways had been there for decades, and you could tell. I got curious and learned that highways are a sign of a super colony of ants. Often each ant hill is its own colony, and if you try to mix the ants from two colonies they will fight with each other. But some species, like the western thatching ants, create super colonies where some of the ants move and create a new hill.

The ants from one colony often visit their offspring, creating highways between them, and if you mix the ants between hills they will tolerate or accept each other. One of the largest known western thatching ant colonies in North America is a supercolony near Lehman Hot Springs in Oregon. It spans almost 10 acres, with an estimated 56 million ants living in 210 active nests. That's 15 million more ants than the number of people living in the entire country of Canada!

Some other amazing fact about ants

- » The hill we see above ground is just the tip. Under the ground the ant hill could be two to three times as deep, aerating the soil, bringing down food that composts into more soil, and creating important pathways for water and air to reach roots deep into the earth.
- » Ants produce formic acid in their abdomen. If you look closely at an ant biting you, you will see them curled up, a sign that they are spraying this acid onto the wound, giving you that uncomfortable sting. They also use this acid to lay down a trail for other ants to follow.
- » In late summer, winged male and females emerge to mate. Once they have mated the male dies and the female sheds her wings and finds a place to colonize, laying eggs underground for up to 15 years. **B**



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