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**COLONY DYNAMICS OF THE
GREEN TREE ANT (*Oecophylla smaragdina* Fab.)
IN A SEASONAL TROPICAL CLIMATE.**

**Thesis submitted by
Cornel Lokkers BSc (JCUNQ)
in March 1990**

**for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
the Department of Zoology,
James Cook University of North Queensland.**

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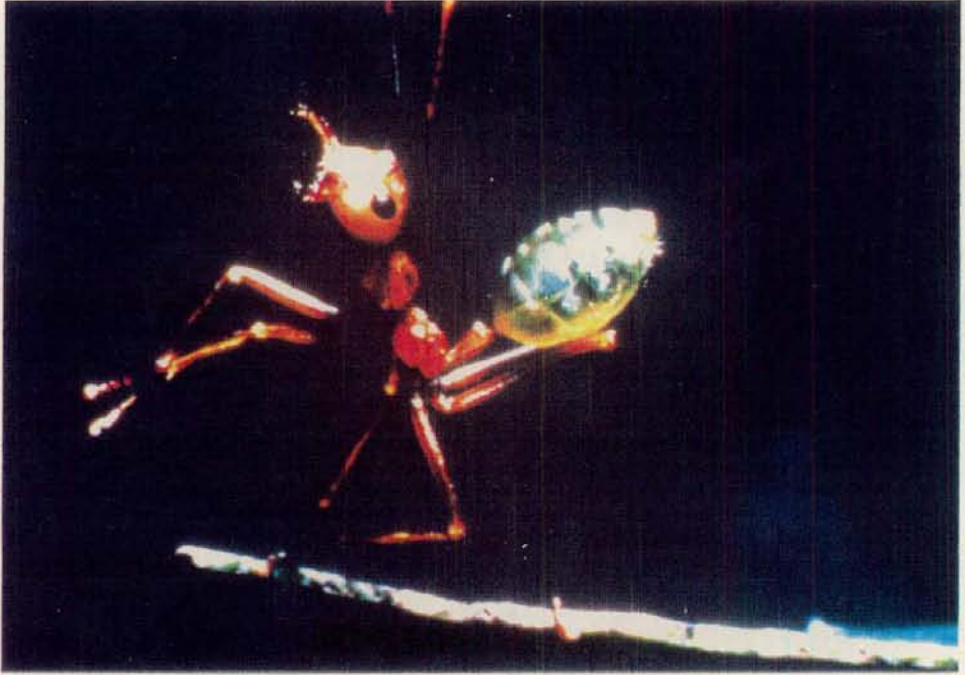
I am indebted to Keith Wright for use of his mango tree plantation at Major Creek during my studies, and to the many people who collected green tree ant queens for me. Dave Hausen provided valuable assistance in the field when sampling nests. The research and technical staff of Biological Sciences were always a source of help in times of trouble. I must thank my fellow students for their understanding and tolerance, especially during the last months of writing.

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Frontispiece.

(a) Green tree ant major worker in alarm posture.

(b) Green tree ants capturing a wasp.



Abstract.

Most previous investigations of the weaver ant genus (*Oecophylla*) have been conducted in the relatively non-seasonal environment of the wet tropics (e.g. Greenslade, 1971a,b, 1972; Ledoux, 1950, 1954; Majer, 1976,a,b,c; Vanderplank, 1960; Way, 1954a,b). The present study documented substantial seasonal variation in colony structure and functioning of green tree ant (*O. smaragdina*) populations in the seasonally dry tropical climate which characterizes most of northern Australia.

The distribution of *O. smaragdina* within Australia was successfully defined by a combination of mean annual rainfall and average minimum temperature, with a curvilinear demarcation between sites with and without ants. Development and survival of ant brood was markedly reduced by low temperatures, especially the larval stage, which had a threshold temperature (when development theoretically stops) of about 17°C. In contrast, the thresholds for eggs and pupae were about 10°C and 7°C, respectively. At higher temperatures, the 2 physical variables probably indirectly limit ant distribution by controlling plant density; ants only inhabited sites with woodland or forest vegetation.

Colony extents (the numbers of trees occupied by colonies) were much larger in native vegetation than in a nearby mango plantation. This difference was probably due to the greater tree density in the native forest site. No canopy interconnections were available in the mango orchard to promote movements of ants between trees. Inter-tree migration is essential for weaver ant colonies, to disseminate brood

from the nest containing the colony's single egg-producing queen and possibly also to maintain a uniform colony recognition scent.

Levels of reproduction in green tree ant colonies were highest during the wet season and early dry season. Sexual forms were present in nests from November until March, and worker brood were most abundant from January until May. Larval and pupal brood levels rose with increasing precipitation up to monthly rainfall figures around 300 mm. Proportions of worker pupae were reduced during periods of higher rainfall, probably due to the production of sexuals at this time.

Colony extents, measured as the number of trees occupied, were smallest in native forest at the end of the dry season in November, and rose while colonies were reproducing. Most colonies reached peak extents in May, when the proportion of flowering trees was highest (and 2 months after the greatest levels of leaf flushing). After May, brood production generally decreased markedly, and colony extents in native vegetation slowly fell, with ants gradually evacuating from peripheral trees into smaller core areas of high tree density. Cycles of colony extent in the mango plantation lagged behind those in native vegetation by 2 to 4 months; maximum extents coincided with mango tree flowering from July to September. Tended homopteran levels in mango tree leaf samples were high during the flowering and fruiting period, suggesting that colony expansion may be facilitated by the increased availability of honeydew.

As colonies expanded, individual nests became smaller and the number of nests (per tree and per colony) increased. Ant distributions were thus dispersed more evenly throughout colonies during this period. This decentralization may improve foraging efficiencies, or may allow increased patrolling of territories when intrusions by other ant

colonies (both intra and inter-specific) are most likely. Highest levels of prey intake and ant movement from nests did coincide with periods of greatest reproduction and dispersion; however, the causal relations between these factors are unknown.

An electronic light beam counter was developed to monitor ant activity (measured as the number of ants leaving and returning from a nest, and standardized between different nests by dividing by the total population of each nest) in native forest over a two year period. Net daily activity was greatest during the wet season months from December to March, and lowest in the dry winter period. The magnitude of these seasonal differences was remarkably high; the largest mean activity of 8.83 ants/nest individual/day (in December) was over 10 times the smallest level of 0.501 (in August). Seasonal patterns of activity correlated well with patterns of total prey weight collected by ants. Liquid food intake, measured as the average weight difference of leaving and returning ants, showed a similar, but very erratic pattern; factors such as varying forager sizes, honeydew intake inside the nest, and differing physiological conditions of inhabited trees prevented successful quantification of this food source.

A consistent circadian pattern of ant activity was observed in autumn and winter (March, May, August): activity peaked around dusk, and dropped to a minimum in the early morning before dawn. This circadian pattern was less distinct or completely absent during the spring and summer months (October, December, January). Activity was generally correlated with temperature; the fitted parabolic relationship suggested that activity was markedly reduced by low temperatures, but was less affected by higher temperatures.

Circadian patterns of activity did not correlate to patterns of

food intake. Most prey was collected during the daylight hours, suggesting that *O. smaragdina* is primarily a visual predator. Honeydew intake also appeared to be greatest after dawn. Nocturnally active ants may be involved in other tasks, such as brood and young adult transport, colony scent dispersal, and territorial patrolling/guarding.

Mango trees with green tree ant populations had more tended homopterans and fewer numbers of most other arthropod groups than adjacent trees without ants. The proportions of leaves with chlorotic scars from homopterans (primarily *Phenacaspis dilata*) were greater in ant-occupied trees. The fractions of leaves with holes from chewing arthropods, and the average area of leaf missing were greater in ant-free trees.

Crop yields during the study were relatively low. However, ants appeared to augment fruit loss in trees with largest crops during the late stages of fruit development, probably by encouraging homopteran populations and so increasing sap loss. Green tree ants also appeared to reduce frugivory by fruit bats, the major predator of mango fruit.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	i
ABSTRACT.	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.	xi
LIST OF PLATES.	xvi
LIST OF TABLES.	xvii
1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION.	1
1.1 Nest structure.	1
1.2 Colony structure.	5
1.3 Diet.	8
1.4 Impact of weaver ants on arboreal arthropods.	10
1.5 Aims of the present project.	12
2. DESCRIPTION OF STUDY SITES.	13
2.1 Townsville.	13
2.2 Major Creek.	23
3. DISTRIBUTIONAL PATTERNS.	25
3.1 Introduction.	25
3.2 Methods.	28
3.3 Results.	30
3.3.1 Distribution in Australia.	30
3.3.2 Distribution in Townsville.	35
3.4 Discussion.	41

4. EARLY COLONY DEVELOPMENT.	46
4.1 Introduction.	46
4.2 Methods.	48
4.3 Results.	52
4.3.1 Phenology of first brood.	52
4.3.2 Developmental rates.	59
4.3.3 Success rates.	63
4.3.4 Pleometrotic colony founding.	65
4.3.5 Colony development after first adult emergence.	68
4.4 Discussion.	69
5. COLONY STRUCTURE.	77
5.1 Introduction.	77
5.2 Methods.	81
5.2.1 Colony extent: Tree number and area occupied.	82
5.2.2 Nest density and longevity.	84
5.2.3 Nest composition.	85
5.3 Results.	87
5.3.1 Colony extent: tree number and area occupied.	87
5.3.2 Inter-colony aggression and colony extent.	95
5.3.3 Nest density.	95
5.3.4 Nest longevity.	98
5.3.5 Nest composition.	98
5.3.6 Worker morphometrics.	115
5.4 Discussion.	117

6. ACTIVITY AND FOOD INTAKE.	126
6.1 Introduction.	126
6.1.1 The components of activity.	126
6.1.2 Food intake and its measurement.	128
6.1.3 Foraging activity.	134
6.2 Methods.	137
6.2.1 Activity.	137
6.2.2 Food input.	148
6.2.3 Ant tagging.	149
6.3 Results.	152
6.3.1 Activity counter calibration.	152
6.3.2 Comparison of inward and outward flow.	155
6.3.3 Field activity patterns.	161
6.3.3.1 Yearly and monthly variation.	161
6.3.3.2 Monthly and circadian variation.	164
6.3.3.3 Circadian variation during each month.	167
6.3.3.4 Field activity: A summary.	181
6.3.4 Laboratory activity patterns.	183
6.3.5 Food intake.	188
6.3.5.1 Prey intake.	188
6.3.5.2 Liquid food intake.	195
6.3.5.2.1 Assumptions of weight differential method.	195
6.3.5.2.2 Spatial variation in liquid food intake.	200
6.3.5.2.3 Patterns of liquid food intake.	202
6.3.5.3 Patterns of worker size.	206
6.3.5.4 Brood transport.	211
6.3.6 Dyed food dispersal.	211

	x
6.4 Discussion.	214
6.4.1 Counting by light beam.	214
6.4.2 Patterns of activity and food intake.	216
7. GREEN TREE ANTS AND MANGO TREES.	225
7.1 Introduction.	225
7.2 Methods.	229
7.3 Results.	235
7.3.1 Insect populations.	235
7.3.2 Leaf condition.	246
7.3.3 Fruit production.	255
7.4 Discussion.	262
8. FINAL CONCLUSIONS.	268
8.1 Factors influencing ant colonies.	268
8.2 The impact of ants on the environment.	273
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	278
APPENDIX A.	289
APPENDIX B.	301

LIST OF FIGURES.

1.1. Adult forms of <i>Oecophylla</i> .	6
2.1. Map of northern Queensland showing locations of study sites.	14
2.2. Climatic patterns in Townsville from January 1985 to May 1989.	16
2.3. Map of Townsville study site in May 1988.	21
2.4. Map of Major Creek study site in May 1988.	24
3.1. World distribution of weaver ants.	26
3.2. Australian distribution of <i>O. smaragdina</i> .	31
3.3. Temperature and rainfall averages of sites with and without ants.	33
3.4. Australian distribution of <i>O. smaragdina</i> in relation to forest and woodland vegetation.	34
3.5. Distribution of ant colonies around biological sciences building, JCUNQ.	36
3.6. Distribution of trees always, sometimes, and never occupied by ants in Townsville study site.	37
3.7. Nearest neighbour distances of trees always, sometimes, and never occupied by ants in Townsville study site.	39
3.8. Proportions of different tree species always, sometimes, and never occupied by ants in Townsville study site.	39
4.1. Design of artificial ant nest.	51
4.2. Phenology of first broods of queens at 24°C.	54
4.3. Phenology of first broods of queens at 30°C.	55
4.4. Phenology of first broods of queens at 35°C.	56
4.5. Phenology of first broods of queens at 20°C.	57
4.6. Developmental rates of immature stages in first broods.	60
4.7. Success rates of first broods at various temperatures.	64
4.8. Phenology of first broods of pleometrotic queen groups (2 queens per group).	67

5.1. Temporal variation in total number of trees occupied in Townsville study site.	88
5.2. Temporal variation in numbers of trees and areas occupied per colony in Townsville study site.	88
5.3. Temporal variation in number of trees occupied and tree condition in Major Creek study site.	90
5.4. Temporal variation in number of trees occupied and tree condition for four tree species in Townsville study site.	92
5.5. Temporal variation in number of trees occupied and composite tree status.	94
5.6. Regression of percentage of trees occupied on composite tree status.	94
5.7. Temporal variation in numbers of trees occupied by 2 conflicting colonies.	94
5.8. Temporal variation in nest densities in 2 tree species.	96
5.9 - 5.14. Temporal variation in nest composition and climate	
5.9. Cairns.	99
5.10. Townsville.	100
5.11. Bowen.	101
5.12. Proserpine.	102
5.13. Mackay.	103
5.14. Yeppoon.	104
5.15. Seasonal pattern in larval proportions.	108
5.16. Effect of current month's rainfall on larval proportions.	108
5.17. Seasonal pattern in pupal proportions.	109
5.18. Effect of previous month's rainfall on pupal proportions.	109
5.19. Effect of current month's temperature on pupal proportions.	109
5.20. Seasonal pattern in ratio of major to minor worker adults.	111
5.21. Effect of previous month's rainfall on ratio of major to minor worker adults.	111
5.22. Temporal variation in nest composition in Townsville study site.	113
5.23. Relationship of scape lengths and thorax lengths in major and minor worker adults.	116

5.24. Temporal variation in scape lengths of major workers in Townsville study site.	116
6.1. Schematic representation of potential trophallactic food flow between foragers feeding on honeydew.	133
6.2. Design of light beam counter for measuring ant activity in the field.	138
6.3. Design of laboratory ant activity counter system.	147
6.4. Design of vacuum-powered ant aspirator.	147
6.5. Calibration of ant flow recorded by light beam counter with manually recorded ant flow.	153
6.6. Efficiency of light beam ant counter in light and dark conditions.	153
6.7. Ant activity recorded by counter from 9.30, 20 May, to 9.10, 21 May 1988.	154
6.8. Circadian variation in inward and outward ant flow in December 1988.	156
6.9. Circadian variation in inward and outward ant flow in May 1988.	156
6.10. Temporal patterns in foraging activity generated by simulation model.	159
6.11. Temporal variation in daily activity.	162
6.12. Monthly variation in circadian activity patterns .	165
6.13. Circadian activity patterns in May.	165
6.14. Circadian activity patterns in August.	170
6.15. Circadian activity patterns in October.	173
6.16. Circadian activity patterns in December.	173
6.17. Circadian activity patterns in January.	176
6.18. Circadian activity patterns in March.	180
6.19. Seasonal variation in optimum temperature for activity and maximum temperature recorded during trials.	184
6.20. Temporal variation in activity of queenright colony in laboratory conditions.	185
6.21. Temporal variation in activity of queenless colony fragment in laboratory conditions.	186

6.22. Temporal variation in number of ants outside nest of queenright colony in laboratory conditions.	184
6.23. Temporal variation in prey intake per 1000 ants.	191
6.24. Seasonal patterns in prey intake.	194
6.25. Circadian patterns in prey intake.	197
6.26. Weight differences between ants leaving and returning to the nest from 2 trails: one leading upwards and one leading downwards.	201
6.27. Temporal variation in weight differences between ants leaving and returning to the nest.	201
6.28. Seasonal patterns in weight differences between ants leaving and returning to the nest.	204
6.29. Circadian patterns in weight differences between ants leaving and returning to the nest.	204
6.30. Temporal variation in leaving ant weights, ant scape lengths, and total prey weight collected.	207
6.31. Seasonal patterns in leaving ant weights.	210
6.32. Circadian patterns in leaving ant weights.	210
6.33. Circadian patterns in numbers of brood transported and numbers of parasites observed near nest.	212
6.34. Dispersal of dyed food throughout ant population.	212
7.1. Map of Major Creek study site showing locations of tree pairs used in trials.	230
7.2. Impact of ants on yearly variation in numbers of <i>Coccus sp.</i>	239
7.3. Impact of ants on seasonal patterns in numbers of <i>Coccus sp.</i>	239
7.4. Impact of ants on inter-tree variation in numbers of <i>Phenacaspis dilata.</i>	239
7.5. Impact of ants on seasonal patterns in numbers of Diptera.	239
7.6. Impact of ants on inter-tree variation in numbers of Psocoptera.	239
7.7. Impact of ants on abundances of various arthropod groups in leaf samples.	245

7.8. Impact of ants on temporal variation in percentages of homopteran-scarred leaves in leaf samples.	248
7.9. Impact of ants on temporal variation in percentages of eaten leaves in leaf samples.	248
7.10. Impact of ants on correlation of proportions of eaten leaves with proportions of homopteran-scarred leaves in leaf samples.	250
7.11. Impact of ants on inter-tree variation in percentage of undamaged leaves in leaf samples.	252
7.12. Effects of ant presence, leaf height, and tree on average leaf area eaten in leaf samples collected in January, 1988.	252
7.13. Impact of ants on inter-tree variation in numbers of mature spikes per m ³ in July, 1987.	257
7.14. Rose diagram of numbers of mature fruit in 45° sectors around trees in November, 1987.	261
7.15. Impact of ants on inter-tree variation in numbers of mature fruit per tree in November, 1987.	257
7.16. Correlation of fruit numbers in October and November, 1987.	261

LIST OF PLATES.

Frontispiece.	ii
1. Leaf nests of <i>O. smaragdina</i> .	4
2.1. Open eucalypt woodland in the Townsville region.	18
2.2. Vegetation in the Townsville study site.	19
2.3. The Major Creek mango plantation.	20
2.4. Sampling the upper canopy of a mango tree.	20
6. An ant counter operating in the field.	139
7. Insect damage of mango leaves.	231

LIST OF TABLES.

3.1. Analysis of variance for nearest neighbour distances of trees always, sometimes, and never occupied by ants.	40
4.1. Numbers of colony founding queens reared at various temperatures from 1986 to 1989.	49
4.2. Numbers of queens in colony founding nests.	65
5.1. Analysis of covariance for proportions of larvae in nests.	106
5.2. Analysis of covariance for proportions of pupae in nests.	106
5.3. Analysis of covariance for ratios of major worker to minor worker adults in nests.	106
6.1. Numbers of days per month of successfully completed activity trials from November 1986 to March 1989.	142
6.2. Analysis of variance design for total day activity counts.	144
6.3. Analysis of variance design for 2 hourly activity counts on individual nests within each month.	145
6.4. Analyses of covariance for daily activity.	163
6.5. Analysis of variance for 2 hourly activity.	165
6.6. Analysis of variance for 2 hourly activity during May.	169
6.7. Analyses of variance and covariance for 2 hourly activity during August.	169
6.8. Analysis of variance for 2 hourly activity during October.	172
6.9. Analysis of variance and covariance for 2 hourly activity during December.	172
6.10. Analysis of variance and covariance for 2 hourly activity during January.	175
6.11. Analysis of variance and covariance for 2 hourly activity during March.	179
6.12. Seasonal and circadian patterns of activity in nests.	182
6.13. Frequencies of prey items collected by foragers.	189
6.14. Analyses of variance for daily prey intake measures.	193
6.15. Analyses of variance for circadian patterns in prey intake.	196
6.16. Analysis of variance for scape lengths of ants.	199

6.17. Analysis of covariance for weights of foragers and nest ants.	199
6.18. Analysis of covariance for daily weight difference between leaving and returning ants.	203
6.19. Analysis of covariance for circadian patterns in weight difference between leaving and returning ants.	203
6.20. Analysis of variance for circadian patterns in weights of ants leaving the nest.	209
7.1. Frequencies of arthropods found in leaf samples.	236
7.2. Analysis of variance for numbers of <i>Coccus</i> sp.	236
7.3. Analysis of variance for numbers of ant-tended homoptera.	238
7.4. Analysis of variance for numbers of <i>Phenacaspis dilata</i> .	238
7.5. Analysis of variance for numbers of spiders.	241
7.6. Analysis of variance for numbers of Coleoptera.	241
7.7. Analysis of variance for numbers of Diptera.	242
7.8. Analysis of variance for numbers of Psocoptera	242
7.9. Analysis of variance for numbers of non-tended arthropods.	243
7.10. Analysis of variance for numbers of eggs.	243
7.11. Analysis of variance for proportions of homopteran-scarred leaves.	247
7.12. Analysis of variance for proportions of eaten leaves.	247
7.13. Analysis of variance for proportions of undamaged leaves.	251
7.14. Analysis of variance for proportions of both homopteran-scarred and eaten leaves.	251
7.15. Analyses of variance and covariance for area of leaf eaten.	254
7.16. Analyses of variance for numbers of spikes per m ³ in July 1987.	256
7.17. Analyses of variance for numbers of spikes and fruit per m ³ in October 1987.	258
7.18. Analysis of variance for number of fruit per tree sector in November 1987.	259