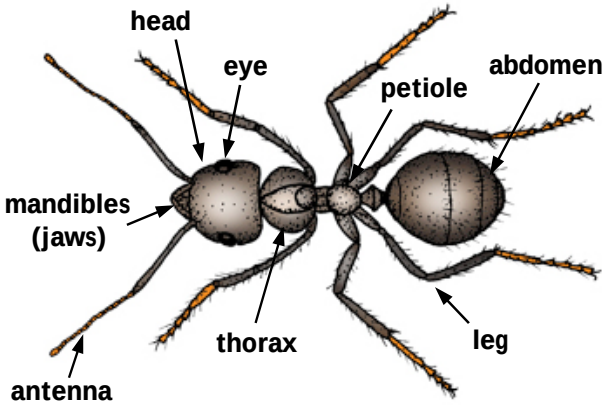
Ants

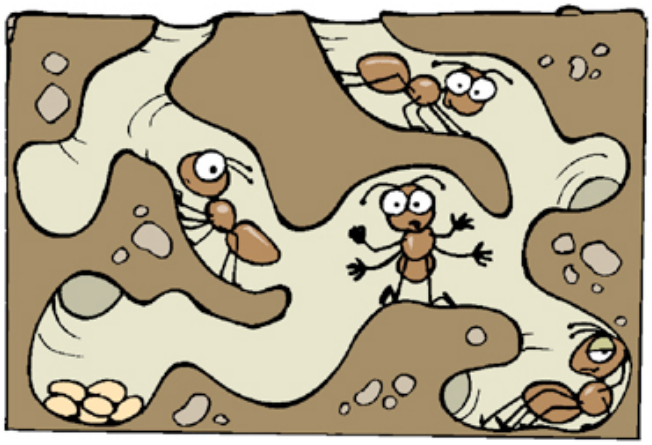
By Stuart Munroe

Ants belong to the same group of insects as the bees and wasps – the ***Hymenoptera*** – with over 40 different species indigenous (that is to say *native*) to Britain and Ireland. There are other species however which sometimes "invade" and are able to survive in permanently heated buildings, hothouses etc. These invaders are often brought in on cargo from foreign countries; most often wood (timber).

An Ant's Body



Ants share a similar body structure to wasps but can be easily distinguished by the 1 or 2 humps, or knots, that occur on the thin "waist" between the foreparts of the thorax and the abdomen.



Ants go through what is known as **complete metamorphosis**; this means that the babies (**larvae**), which resemble small maggots, look completely different to the adult ant, going through a middle **pupa** stage just like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.
The larvae have no legs and so are carried everywhere by the worker adults; for example from one chamber of the nest to another if they are too hot or cold.

Who does what?

Unlike some bees and wasps, there are no solitary ants. All ants are **social** which means they live together in a highly organised group, usually in an underground nest. This nest contains many different chambers; for rearing eggs/larvae or storing food. The social structure is split up into specialised groups of individuals or **castes**; there is the **Queen** who lays all the eggs and is cared for by the **workers** and **soldiers** who are all sterile females (they cannot lay eggs). Later in the summer winged males are produced which, along with new-born queens, are the flying ants we see in late July and August.

Smelly-vision!

Ants do not "see" very well; most of their sense of the environment around them and communication is done by chemical smells and by touch, using their antennae. Ants leave special "scent" trails for others to follow to food sources. This is why we often see long trails of ants going back and fore from their nest.
Each species, often each nest, has its own distinct smell, which allows the soldiers on guard to recognise and attack intruders. However some insects, including beetles and other ants, copy this nest smell allowing them to live and eat in the nest of the host ant without being attacked!

Most ants eat other small insects, which they find dead or kill by biting, stinging or squirting chemicals onto them. The Driver Ants and Army Ants of South America and Africa will even catch and kill much larger prey such as tarantulas, scorpions and lizards using sheer numbers to subdue their victims (these colonies can exceed 500,000 individuals). In addition, most ants supplement their diet with nectar from flowers and even "farm" aphids (greenfly) for the sugary substance they excrete.