



Water shrews are busy in ponds

Sow wildflower seeds now to encourage summer wildlife



Orange-tip butterflies are on the wing



TINY & WILD ROSS PIPER

Red wood ants

Tiny jets of formic acid erupt from a seething mass of plucky little creatures, affronted by your presence. These are wood ants.

The nest mounds of these industrious animals can be as much as 2m high, the nest itself extending underground for about the same distance; a labyrinthine complex of tunnels and galleries.

Nearly all of the ants in a nest mound are workers, responsible for everything from building the nest and protecting it to finding food and tending to the brood – their baby sisters and brothers – who are produced in an endless stream of eggs by their mother, the queen.

If you watch a nest mound in the spring and summer, you'll see dead insects being transported along the foraging trails. Wood ants are effective predators and scavengers, but as much as 90% of their food is sweet

honeydew they "milk" from the back ends of aphids. Like miniature shepherds tending their flock, the ants are very protective of the aphids. They'll even move their livestock to better feeding grounds to increase the production of honeydew.

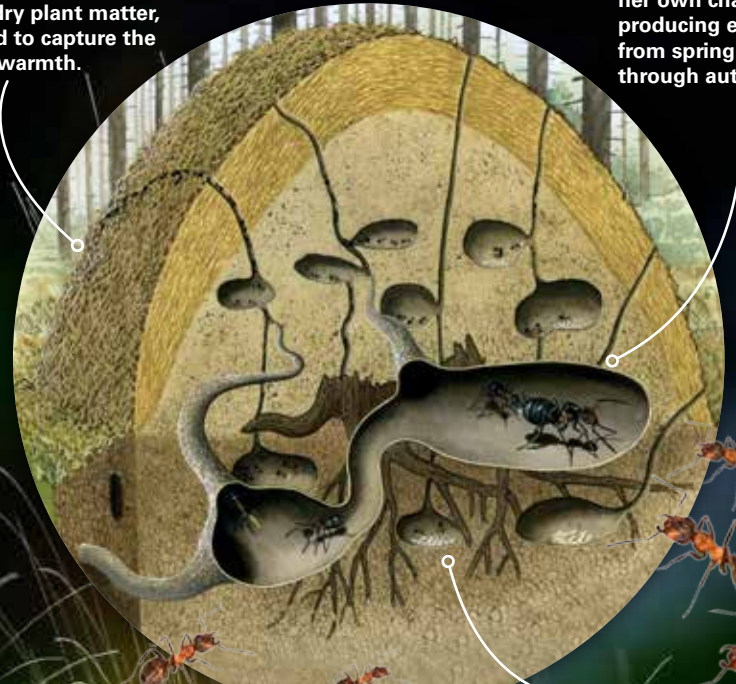
Red wood ants have a big impact on tree growth and forest structure.

They also play a crucial role in nutrient cycling, taking honeydew and arthropod prey from the surrounding forest down into their subterranean chambers. These outside nutrients, the waste material produced in the nest and the constant digging helps to enrich the soil for further plant growth. Red wood ants are nothing short of ecosystem engineers.

Look for these ants and their unmistakable nest mounds in woodlands. They're warmth loving, so the best places to see them are glades, woodland rides and forest edges.

The mound is thatched with dry plant matter, angled to capture the sun's warmth.

The queen is fed and attended in her own chamber, producing eggs from spring through autumn.



WOOD ANT NEST

The queen's eggs are carried to nursery chambers.

300,000+
wood ants in a single nest mound

15-20 yrs
LIFE EXPECTANCY OF QUEEN

90%
of wood ants' diet is sweet honeydew, milked from aphids.



Ross Piper is an entomologist, zoologist and explorer. Find out more at rosspiper.net

