

Ant mimics

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Would you eat ants? Most things don't: they avoid them. Ants smell bad, bite, some spray formic acid and there's not much meat on them. Most birds leave them alone.



The Asian Red Ant: the dominant insect of the forest.

Given that ants are not popular as dinner: supposing you were small and weak and tasty: would it improve your chance of living long enough to mate and lay eggs if you looked like an ant? It might, and over time evolution has modified the body shape and behaviour of many small creatures to do just that: to mimic ants for their own safety.

In this post we will illustrate selected examples we find in our yard. Each one of these will have a post of its own in time but for starters here is a survey that includes spiders, wasps, an unusual bug and a very unusual thrips from South America that is now established in many, if not all, tropical countries worldwide.

There are insect species that mimic ants in their juvenile form, we find them too, but in this first post on the subject we will confine ourselves to adult ant-mimics.

Myrmarachnae plataleoides



https://www.flickr.com/photos/jacobs_ian/14439825274/in/album-72157642617173565/

Perhaps the best known ant mimics are jumping spiders in the genus *Myrmarachnae*. For instance: this is not an ant! It has the colour and size of a red ant, it runs about on leaves like a red ant, it waves its front legs like antennae and looks to have three body segments, but it doesn't: it has a modified cephalothorax and the abdomen of a regular spider and has eight legs and eight eyes. *It is a Spider.*

As far as we know this spider doesn't eat ants. The mimicry is for protection, not camouflage to help with hunting. These are not rare, they can be found quite often running about on their own, but they are difficult to spot. They look so much like an ant that they're usually overlooked.

More spiders



Look carefully at this one. The front legs look like antennae and there is a white triangular patch where the second leg joins the cephalothorax. The white adds to the impression of three body parts: not the two of a spider. The partly digested remains of a midge are still in the spider's jaws.



Another jumping spider. It too likes midges and is not an ant.

Parasitic wasps

There are many species of small parasitic wasps that lay eggs in the eggs of other insects. They act as population controls and are a valuable, even essential, part of the natural web of life. Some of these wasps mimic ants to avoid predation as they run on leaves looking for victims.



This black wasp was found in our yard. It has bent antennae like an ant, is wingless, and has long legs like an ant. The head is that of a wasp but the body (except for an ovipositor) is more like that of an ant.



Dryinidae: (female), another parasitic wasp that we see once or twice a year. It has wings but avoids the camera by running on leaves like an ant.

A bug and a thrips



Miridae, a small (3 mm) predatory bug in the genus *Pilophorus*. It has vestigial wings but seldom if ever flies, spending its time running and hunting like an ant. This one is common in our basil bushes.



Franklinothrips vespiformis, a predatory Thrips (female) that is 2.5 mm in length. The partly transparent section creates the illusion of a narrow waist. Unlike the many species of slow sap-sucking Thrips this one is fast, has a big ant-like head and the eyesight of a predator.