

ENTOMOLOGIST SETS NEW RECORD AT MT SMART
or
IRIDOMYRMEX HUMILIS ESTABLISHED IN NEW ZEALAND

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I have become very familiar with ants in the field, both from watching them in my own back yard and in captive colonies, and by collecting them almost everywhere I go.

I recently took part in the opening ceremony for the Commonwealth Games. During rehearsals at Mt Smart Stadium, the reddish-brown ants I saw in trails on the concrete steps of the grandstand did not "ring a bell", so I decided to collect some and have a closer look. Checking them in the lab against intercepted specimens and descriptions, I was convinced they were the Argentine ant, *Iridomyrmex humilis*, not previously recorded from New Zealand. Dave Manson, who has much expertise with intercepted insects, agreed with my diagnosis, and we sent specimens to Bob Taylor, ant specialist in Australia, who confirmed our suspicions.

Further searching of the Mt Smart area revealed these ants are very common on garden flowers in streets surrounding the stadium. The only other ant commonly taking nectar from flowers in New Zealand is the relatively large *Paratrechina vagans*

and occasionally the smaller *Technomyrmex albipes* and *I. glaber* will visit flowers. All three are introduced species with black colouration. We also found the Argentine ant in litter bins where fruit juice or soft drink containers had been deposited, and many ant trails across the footpaths. We disturbed one nest site under the edge of a curb on O'Rourke Road near the stadium, although we did not find the queen.

At the next rehearsal, I discovered their trails even at the top of No. 1 grandstand, where I had gone for a better vantage point for photographs. In the evening, when the floodlights came on at dusk, winged males began alighting on those of us performing in light coloured clothing.

Argentine ant workers bite, which is something New Zealanders (Aucklanders anyway) are becoming used to since the arrival of its close cousin *I. anceps*, a slightly larger ant, with long legs and which is very fast running and a greyish black colour. *Iridomyrmex humilis* moves very quickly, and has relatively longer legs than the more familiar *T. albipes* or *I. glaber* - the two most common household invading ants.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries recommended that the Auckland Regional Council have the grandstands of the stadium sprayed because of the nuisance value of the ants to spectators at the games. MAF is taking no steps to eradicate the Argentine ant because it is apparently already well established. It seems likely that it has been in New Zealand at least one season before this chance encounter. John Walsby, writer for the *New Zealand Herald*, has conjured up amusing images of the Opening Ceremony at Mt Smart with teams of the highly organised social ants performing their own well-rehearsed marching routines (trails) but only one person recognising them!



NZ HERALD

One contingent not welcome

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A plague of noxious foreign ants, noted for their stupidity, have unwisely chosen Mt Smart Stadium as their New Zealand home.

And it was the way they walked — quickly — which helped to give them away.

Unfortunately for the insects a sharp-eyed entomologist, Olwyn Green, who just happened to be taking part in the games opening ceremony, spotted them during rehearsals.

They are thought to be Argentine ants, or *Iridomyrmex humilis*, which feature on Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries warning posters. Samples have been sent to Australia for confirmation.

Mrs Green, who works at the ministry's plant protection unit at Lynfield, was one of two violin players for the Austrian dance group — and the ants had picked on an expert for a display of their marching talents.

"I have kept ants as pets and made a special study of them. I can recognise the different species by the way they walk, how fast they move, even the way the sun shines off their backs," said Mrs Green.

"At rehearsals on Sunday, I was sitting in Grandstand No 2 watching a trail of ants when I realised I could not place them.

"Someone spilled a drink on my violin case and the ants covered it, but the samples were actually from a flower I took home."

Mrs Green carried out several identifications at work the next day. They seemed to be Argentine ants, not found in New Zealand, so she called in a retired entomologist, Mr David Manson, and a

By LOUISE MATTHEWS

colleague, Mr Ruud Kleinpaste.

They made the same diagnosis and the team found more of the ants in the streets around the stadium.

However, fears of a savage ant invasion were probably unfounded, said Mr Kleinpaste.

"It was originally thought, mainly from 1920s textbooks, that the species would bite 'if so inclined.' But Australian colleagues who have worked with them say that is not true," he said.

"They are more likely to be a domestic nuisance as they have a voracious appetite for sweet things — they are also particularly stupid, so are easy to catch or bait and kill.

"The only warning to people going to the games would be to watch what they are doing with their cans of soft drinks. If they leave them at their feet they are likely to find a lot of ants when they pick them up again," he said.

Specimens have been sent to experts in Canberra to check whether they are Argentine ants or a closely related Australian species such as *Iridomyrmex darwinii*.

Mandible and other measurements will reveal in about 10 days whether they are the banned ant or another invader.

Argentine ants are now not thought to be a threat to agriculture except to certain kinds of Californian citrus growing methods. They are more of a domestic pest.