

Pet Life

& ANIMAL NEWS

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See Page 22

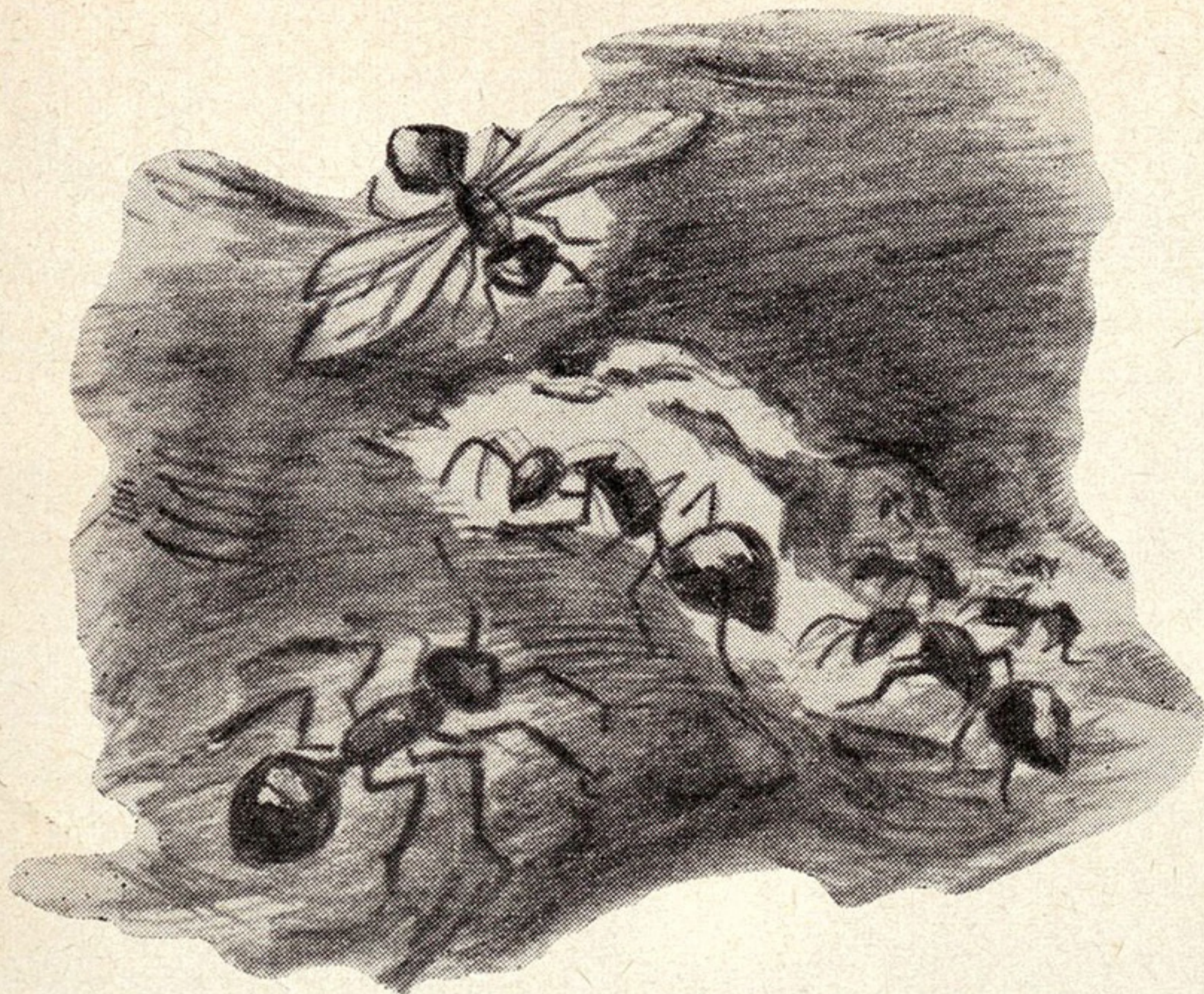
In this issue

The Pekingese,
House-training Your Cat,
Ants as Pets,
Heritage of Fear,
a true story of a Dog's courage.

And many other interesting and
instructive articles.



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HISTORY



ANTS AS PETS

by Alan P. Major

ANTS may seem rather tiny and unusual creatures to keep as pets at home, but they are very interesting and fascinating to watch. Also there is no need to be doubtful about having them indoors because with a little care there is no risk of being stung or of their escaping.

Normally, when we study an ants' nest we can only watch them moving about on the surface of the earth, until they move into their nest entrances and cannot be seen until they reappear, but with an ant observation nest, or formicaria to give it its proper name, you can watch them all the time, both inside and outside the nest.

A formicaria can be made and stocked very cheaply. All you need is a thick picture frame, complete with glass, which is wide enough to allow you to fit another sheet of glass on the other side, *at the back*. Thus you have a picture frame with glass on *both* sides, as indicated in illustration (1), which you can see right through. The glass sheet for the back can be bought quite cheaply at a glazier's or handyman's shop and affixed to the back of the frame, around the edges, by using a sealing tape or gummed paper. The ideal size is about 12 in. × 8 in., though the larger and thicker the frame the bigger ant nest you can keep. Old picture frames can be bought for a few shillings at any second-hand shop and it is easier to affix the glass to the frame if the latter is a plain one and not a decorated or carved one, as these will have a gap between the glass and the wood because of the carving. If you prefer it the frame can be mounted on legs or blocks so that it will stand on its own. Cotton reels of the same size can be used as legs and easily screwed through the hole into the base.

Of course, if you are also interested in carpentry and do odd jobs at home, then you may prefer to make your own frame. You need four pieces of wood and two sheets of glass. All round the inside of the wood cut two grooves, to allow the glass to fit into the frame. In the top length of the frame drill two

holes, approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch in diameter. Over one of these firmly tack a piece of fine mesh perforated zinc or something similar. These should not be large enough to allow the ants to escape and is to allow air into the frame. The other hole should be the size of a cork which fits tightly, and is only taken out to feed the ants, or to allow a few drops of water to be dropped on to the nest to regulate the humidity inside the frame. When finished the frame should be carefully examined to see that there are no spaces between the wood and the glass through which the ants could escape. After examining and finding it is well sealed, the outside of the frame can be painted in any colour you prefer, but do not place the ants in the frame until several weeks have passed and the paint is completely dry and no longer smells. Ants have a strong sense of smell and would be affected by the paint.

An ant colony can also be kept in a glass jar or an aquarium tank, but the open top must be completely covered to stop the ants escaping, yet it must be perforated to allow air into the tank or jar, otherwise the glass will become sweaty and humid and the ants will die. There is the disadvantage of not being able to see right into the centre of the nest and the ants actually at work. But an advantage is that you can grow small flowering plants, very tiny trees, and cacti in the tank, too, and these help to keep the air in the tank pure, provide food for some kinds of ants, and also make the tank more natural for the ants to live in. It looks much nicer, too.

Next you require the ant colony. I expect most of you have seen an ants' nest in your garden or when walking in the countryside. To collect one to take home for your frame you need a shovel and a wide stoppered jar. The most important thing is to get one or more of the queen ants, a supply of the workers and as many of the egg-like cocoons as you can. You may have to dig over a foot into the nest to find the queen ant, as she is generally in a cell in the middle or bottom of the nest guarded by workers, who tend and feed her. She may also be close to the nursery cells containing the eggs, young ants and cocoons. You will recognise the queen by her large size compared with the tinier worker ants. Many other kinds of small creatures also live in an ants' nest and these should be collected at the same time. Very small white lice are common in ants' nest and the ants like them to be there because they are working as dustmen, cleaning the cells and tunnels of waste refuse that would otherwise accumulate or have to be removed by the worker ants themselves. Some kinds of small beetles also act as dustmen in the nest and are welcomed by the ants.

When collecting almost fill the jar with *earth from the nest* and put all your captured creatures, eggs and cocoons on top of this to carry home. In some strange way the ants prefer the earth from their own nest and sometimes die when put on a different soil. As you will need quite a lot to fill your frame,

especially if it is a large one, take a good supply home with you, this having the advantage of already being in the right temperature and conditions to start your ant colony.

To complete the frame put a funnel used for pouring liquid, into the hole at the top through which the ants are to be fed, and slowly tip the earth into the funnel, until the frame is nearly full. Shake gently to settle the earth and then carefully introduce the eggs, cocoons and ants into the frame by lightly dropping them down the funnel into the frame. If you find difficulty in picking up these tiny creatures, a small pair of tweezers can be used for this purpose, but care must be taken that they are not squeezed too tightly or the ants will be injured or die and the eggs be damaged.

The ant colony can be fed with bread and biscuit crumbs, on which jam or honey has been spread, grains of sugar, seeds, tiny pieces of fruit such as orange and strawberry. Some of the kinds of ants are flesh-eaters, too, and can be given dead flies, greenfly and other similar insects.

Did you know that ants also have "cows" which they milk? They explore plants near their nest until they discover one with young greenfly feeding under the leaves. Every day the ants visit the greenfly and obtain a kind of sweet juice that the greenfly exudes from their bodies. It is a good idea to find a

plant with greenfly on it yourself and push its roots into the earth in the tank for your ants to enjoy.

Altogether there are over 30 kinds of ants in Britain, some of which are much more common than others. You will discover that they live in very different places—some kinds under stones, others in tree trunks, amongst grass roots or cracks in the pavement, others, such as the large Wood Ant, make a huge nest hill of twigs, leaves, straws, etc., sometimes up to 3 feet high. Never poke or disturb a Wood Ants' nest because it is too big for your own formicaria and also the Wood Ant is one of the ants which can sting badly. Some of the ants have curious names—Shining Guest ant, Erratic ant, Slender ant, Negro ant, Indolent ant, Jet ant, Blood-red ant; then there is the Dark Forest ant, Grass ant, Wood, Meadow, Brown, Yellow, Red and Garden ants.

By studying them you will discover many interesting facts about these industrious and hard-working insects. For instance, you will notice that they come above the ground more during a certain time of the day, or prefer special kinds of weather. You will see how when one worker ant discovers a dead insect or piece of food, or some nest material too heavy for it to move on its own how it returns to the nest and leads other ants to the food or material to help it move the obstacle. Many other interesting habits can be seen and happy hours spent studying your home-made ant observation-nest.