



Narrow-headed ant (*Formica exsecta*)

The narrow-headed ant lives alongside a number of closely related species in woodland or heathland.

Did you know?

- Workers are very aggressive and kill larger wood ants by climbing onto their backs and decapitating them!
- Fire, quarrying and motorbike scrambling threaten their habitat and colonies.
- Like many ants, the narrow-headed ant farms aphids for honeydew.

Where it lives

It lives in clearings in woodland and makes a nest about 40 cm across from dead heather. The nest is built in the open and the colony's survival depends on the nest being heated up by the sun.

In Scotland the narrow-headed ant has been found in the Cairngorm pinewoods at Glenmore, Abernethy, Rothiemurchus and Carrbridge and further south at Mar and Rannoch. Only two other sites remain in England, both of them lowland heaths in Devon.

What it looks like

The wingless worker ant looks like most ants: about 6 mm long with dull red legs and thorax, and a brown head and abdomen. It is similar to the wood ant, but you can identify a narrow-headed ant by looking at the back of its head. In good light, you will see a notch whereas the head of the wood ant is rounded. Female ants are larger than males and both are born in the summer.

What it eats

The worker ants search the surrounding vegetation for small insects and collect honeydew from aphids for grubs in the nest.

What is its lifecycle

After the queen has mated she flies high into the sky looking for a recent clearing in the trees. It is thought that the queen takes over the nests of other ant species. Worker ants rear the young and when enough new workers have been born, a new nest is built and these workers begin foraging for food. Colonies may split to form new ones within a clearing and if the nest becomes shaded by vegetation they will move to a new site.

What's being done to help the narrow-headed ant

This ant is scarce and is considered a priority species in the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan. Reduction in numbers is generally due to the loss of heathland, sites becoming overgrown because of lack of grazing, and direct damage to sites.

The Narrow-Headed Ant Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group is working closely with managers of woodland and heathland areas to improve levels of grazing and the amount of clearings. Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), Aberdeen University and Exeter University are currently researching the habits and requirements of this species to find out what is needed to help save it.



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