

Birds and Ants

On 10th July, whilst sitting in the garden in the evening sampling a pleasant Sauvignon Blanc, we were alerted to some small bird activity in the vicinity of a small paved area next to a buddleia. After watching for a while we realised that a juvenile Great Tit was actively “anting” – picking up an ant from the paving and stuffing it under its wing. It did this for about 10 minutes. It was the first time we had seen a tit doing this – usually it is Blackbirds (actually, at the moment, one particular Blackbird) and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. We are used to seeing this activity in our garden but there is very little actually known about it.



It is widely thought to be due to the bird deriving some benefit from the formic acid emitted by the ants such as reducing avian parasites in the feathers. However there is no proof of this, and the amounts of formic acid would be so low (these are very small black ants) that it is difficult to believe that it would have much effect. And why was only one bird doing it? Maybe it just feels nice? Or another theory is that the birds are removing the formic acid from the ant in order to eat it – this seems ludicrous as birds are usually happy to eat ants, formic acid and all. Or maybe the chemicals in the ant fluids supplement the oils from the birds’ preen gland.

An interesting experiment in America with Blue Jays seemed to prove that the activity is instinctive. Some young Blue Jays which had never seen an ant were presented with either normal ants or ones that had their formic acid dispensers removed. The jays presented with formic-acid-less ants just gobbled them up. The ones presented with ants complete with formic acid, immediately started to “ant” with them. Which explains why a Great Tit only 6 weeks out of the nest was able to do it.

There is also something called “passive anting” where a bird allows ants to run over its plumage, and while doing so often adopts a strange pose, leaning over with one wing out, rump feathers splayed, with its necked kinked and beak open. They look really odd, as if they are in a trance. We see Blackbirds doing this often – but not always where there are ants – they often seem to be just sunbathing. Again this may help with feather maintenance.



So all a bit of a mystery!

Immediately after the “anting” episode we realised that there were flying ants emerging from the paving. They were immediately gobbled up by Chiffchaffs, Great Tits and Blue Tits, followed by a Robin and a Blackbird. Those that escaped flew upward into the gape of the ever-hungry Swallows!

But as mentioned above we regularly see birds eating ants, not just the flying sort. We have a Great Spotted Woodpecker who flies into the garden, straight to the paving through the middle of the lawn, where he proceeds to Hoover up ants for many minutes at a time.

Rosemary Royle