

## **ANT COURSE BEGINNINGS - one person's view**

Stefan Cover

The first sign that an Ant Course was to come into being manifested itself about 5 years ago. One day Bob Johnson asked me if I had heard of the Bee Course, taught in August at the Southwestern Research Station in Portal, Arizona. When I replied in the affirmative, he remarked that we ant people should develop a similar course for ants, and said that along with teaching students, it would be a chance to bring the myrmecological community together once a year. It was a great idea, but since it is well known to all (and especially to Bob) that I can't organize my way out of a paper bag, it seemed most unlikely this was something I could do successfully – so I promptly and efficiently forgot about it.

About a year later I got a call from Brian Fisher, who was in the midst of interviewing for a curatorship at the California Academy of Sciences. Excitedly, Brian told me he was sitting right outside the office of the President of the Academy, and in a minute he would have to march in and explain his Grand Vision for all he would accomplish as a curator. “You're kidding!” I exclaimed, “What on earth are you going to tell him?” Brian, of course, had a Plan, and part of it was... teaching an ant course. He asked me if I had heard of the Bee Course at SWRS and what did I think of doing an ant course along the same lines at the same place? I replied something like “Funny you should mention that, Uncle Bob asked me the same question about a year ago and I just let it slide because I could never see myself organizing such a thing.” Brian said, “I'll organize it – that's what I'm good at.” And thus the Ant Course was born!

No doubt bedazzled by Brian's Napoleonic concept of a New Industrial Ant Taxonomy [today Madagascar, tomorrow the planet, next week the Universe, next month everything published and on the web], the Academy wisely offered him the job. A regular paycheck now assured, the following summer (2000) Brian was able to meet me at the Southwestern Research Station just before the Bee Course. SWRS is a uniquely appropriate place to hold an Ant Course. It has the most diverse ant fauna known from anywhere in North America north of the Mexican border (180 spp. as of September, 2003). There is also a vibrant tradition of ant research in the Chiricahua Mtns. that dates back to T.C. Schneirla in the 1950's. Lastly, it doesn't hurt any that it is one of the most beautiful places on the planet. At the Station we met with Bee Course co-organizer Ron McGinley, who dispensed much invaluable advice and saved us from having to re-invent the wheel about 50 times. In addition, Wade and Emily Sherbrooke, then Director and Assistant Director of the station respectively, were very supportive and smoothed the way logistically. Greatly encouraged by this kind assistance, we took the plunge and booked the first Ant Course for August of 2001.

This left the annoying, but always vital question of coming up with the dough, cabbage, wampum ... money! The Bee Course format is to pay the travel and lodging expenses of the instructors to induce them to donate their services to the course. The instructor to student ratio is very high (almost 1:2) which is plus for several reasons, not

least of which is that students are exposed to a wide variety of approaches, personalities, and research interests. Brian and I wanted to adopt this format, but it meant we would need considerable additional funds if the Course was to be kept affordable for students. In the absence of winning lottery tickets, inheriting money, or either of us finding buried treasure, Brian proposed in effect that we try out the advice offered in Luke 11:9 (“Ask and it shall be given unto you”). This sounded most improbable to me but, as I had nothing better to suggest, we asked for...and received generous financial support from the E. O. Wilson Foundation and from the Schlinger Foundation. These grants made all that followed possible, and we will always be deeply grateful that both foundations took a chance on two scruffy ant collectors and thereby brought the Ant Course into being.

From a vantage point three years later, I think Brian and I would agree that the Ant Course has turned out to be something more than the sum of its parts and that the darn thing has rather assumed a life of its own. Personally, I have no hesitation whatever in attributing this good result primarily to the benevolent attitude of the Ant-Gods, who apparently favor our humble undertaking, despite our all-too-numerous shortcomings. Incidental credit, however, must also be given to instructors and students alike. The instructors have been simply wonderful. They work hard to convey an enormous quantity of information in a very short time, while they simultaneously transmit their love for myrmecology without any effort at all. This blend of densely-packed information leavened with much enthusiasm has helped the course transcend the traditional, ritualized “sleep-learning” that still afflicts so much of formal education today. In addition, the Course makes no attempt to dictate point of view, so the students get to see where the instructors agree or disagree about everything from vials and glue to the great issues of our day. This allows them to see the field as it is, without editing – a big plus in my opinion, and the resultant minor squabbling on the part of the instructors is more than offset by the conveyance of a realistic and inclusive vision of the field. The students too have been great. Not only do they display a genial tolerance of the instructors, but seeing so much talent and energy among those entering the field has brought joy to the heart of more than one aging ant collector, I can assure you.

Lastly I want to pay tribute to my good friend Brian Fisher. Those who know him well rightly suspect the possibility that there was some interbreeding with Shrews (Mammalia: Insectivora) at some point in the Fisher family history. How else to account for his inexhaustible energy, not to mention his ability to eat three times his body weight daily and remain as thin as a twig! That aside, in working so hard to bring the Ant Course into being, Brian has demonstrated that non-kin directed altruism remains an important part of the human behavioral repertoire, and that those that see humans as totally self-absorbed, evil, or completely oblivious, have at least one piece of evidence that will discomfit their sombre views of human nature!