

Jet Ants - *Lasius fuliginosus*

The following information is taken from an article written by **Dr Judy Webb** for the Spring 2010 edition of the New Marston Wildlife Group Newsletter



One of the stumps of the dying Lombardy Poplars beside the hedge at the Marston Road side of Milham Ford Nature Park was taken over by these very special ants, which live only in hollow trees. They are a shining glossy black, like the mineral Jet - hence their name. They are slightly bigger than normal lawn ants and have distinctive heart-shaped heads.

These ants chew up the wood of a hollow tree and use it to make a paste from which they construct a home of cells inside the tree.

Jet Ants are becoming increasingly uncommon because by hollowing out the tree they make it unstable at the base, so that it becomes likely to fall and then be removed by humans, killing the ants.

Winged male and queen Jet ants on dying Poplar stump

Photo taken by Judy Webb – for full-size photos, click [here](#)

Video of Jet Ants by Marilyn Cox, click [here](#)

Like other ants, the workers go away from the nest tree to seek protein food for their larvae (mostly soft insects such as caterpillars) but they also feed on sugary honeydew droplets produced by aphids on the leaves of nearby trees and shrubs. In fact, the Jet Ants 'farm' their favoured aphids in the same way as

humans do cows. The ant workers carry the aphids to fresh leaf 'pastures' and 'milk' them for their honeydew.



During the winter they take the aphids 'indoors' down into their nest in the tree stump to keep them safe from harsh weather, bringing them out to pastures new in the spring.

The home constructed by the Jet Ants looks rather like a smoky-grey empty honey comb.

The 'fuliginosus' part of their Latin name refers to the colour of these cells.

A component of the walls of the cells is a mould fungus that grows nowhere else except in such nests.

Empty nest of Jet Ants - photo by Dr Judy Webb

A pen beside it gives an indication of size

Judy reports: 'The most remarkable thing I found out is that the nest of the ants inside the tree can be home to several species of other insects (beetles, flies, spiders), all of which are found nowhere else and somehow depend on the ants. One of these is the rare little black fly *Milichia ludens* (designated Red Data Book list, level 2). By sheer luck, and being in the right place, at the right time, I have become the expert on this fly!' See *Dipterists Forum 'Adopt a Species' section of a page on Judy's [website](#)*