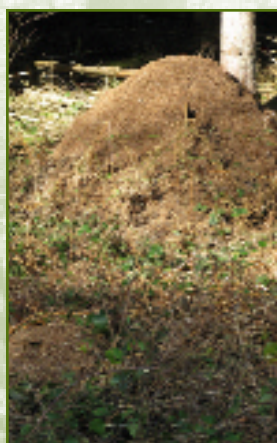


The southern wood ant



A southern wood ant worker.
(Robin Williams.)



A wood ant nest.

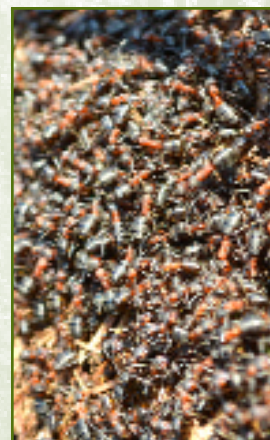
This panel celebrates one of the smaller creatures of the Blean, but one of the largest species of ants in the UK, the southern wood ant (*Formica rufa*). They can be found almost everywhere in the Blean. Their distinctive nests are made up of bits of twigs, leaves and grass, which can get to over one metre tall, even though a large part of the nest can lie underground. A nest can be quite alarming when looked at closely, as the thousands of ants they house present a heaving mass of activity.

The nest is inhabited all year round, and the ants regulate the temperature inside by ensuring that the slope of the nest is angled to get the most sun, and by opening and closing numerous holes around the nest to ventilate or keep the heat in. They can also bring heat into the nest by sunbathing in large numbers and bringing this stored body heat into the nest.

The colony is made up of soldiers, workers, nurses and guards, and around May, if the temperature, humidity and other conditions are just right, the virgin females take to the air to mate with winged males. These mated queens then start a new colony, either in their birth nest or by starting a colony elsewhere. Some ants invade the nests of other colonies and enslave their workers.

Contrary to popular understanding, wood ants don't sting, although it may feel like it. In fact they spray a concentration of formic acid, which is used to kill prey and as a defence mechanism.

These tiny creatures are not everyone's favourite, but they do contribute a lot to a healthy woodland. One of the most important foods for the ants comes from milking aphids, mostly found in oak, as well as other small insects and larvae, many of which are considered forest pests. The ants are also themselves the food of other distinctive woodland animals such as woodpeckers and badgers.



Wood ants en masse.

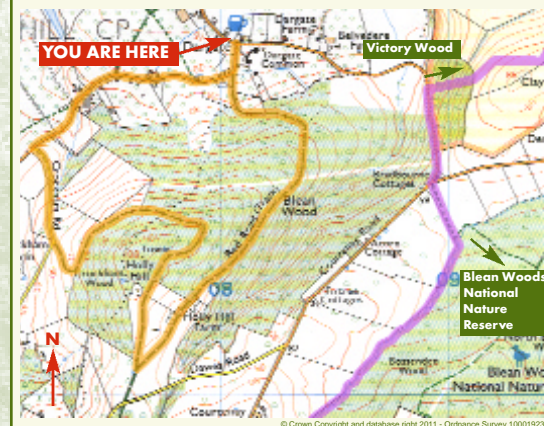


Wood ants attacking an insect larva.



Walking in the Blean

3 miles (5 km) - some steep sections
PLEASE TAKE CARE ON THE ROAD



KEY

Circular walk — Big Blean Walk —

Information on walks from Tourist Information Centres or The Blean Initiative:
www.theblean.co.uk

**Please follow the Countryside Code
Respect - Protect - Enjoy**

the **Blean** is just minutes away...

Covering over 11 square miles, the Blean is one of the largest and most distinctive areas of ancient woodland in England, important nationally for both its wildlife and its history. The Blean has been a working woodland for over a thousand years, and continues to provide woodland products, including firewood and fencing materials, for local people. The splendour and tranquillity of this special landscape can be enjoyed on a network of paths and trails. This panel is part of a series of 18 located around the Blean. To see all 18 panels, visit www.theblean.co.uk. For information about walking in Kent visit www.kent.gov.uk/explorekent.

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