

In N.Y.C. Apartments, the Ants Go Marching Up

Like many ambitious New Yorkers, the ManhattAnt is a social climber.



By Dodai Stewart

July 10, 2022 Updated 8:15 a.m. ET

When Katie Guhl traveled at the end of May — to a wedding in New Orleans and a Memorial Day gathering in New Jersey — she left her apartment on East 81st street spotless. So when she returned home to find swarms of ants in her kitchen, she was livid.

“There were no crumbs to be had,” she said. She’d never seen ants there before, and had not expected to: She lives on the 6th floor.

Unlike the cockroach — the unofficial mascot of New York City apartments — ants aren’t quite as common in high rises, preferring soil-filled parks and yards. But now, scientists who study ants say a species from Europe has recently made the city its home, and the insects are now being found in living spaces several stories above the street.

On the r/Brooklyn forum on Reddit, a rattled ant infestation witness wrote, “Woke up this morning to ants crawling around my living room. I live on the 3rd floor and have never had problems with any insects.” Another added: “I worked in an apartment building, and the 25th floor had ants in midtown.”

Spontaneously, “they just showed up one day,” said Melissa Russell Paige, who has lived in the same second floor Brooklyn apartment for 8 years and “never saw an ant even once.” Her upstairs neighbor had them too. In a text message, she shared three photos of liquid ant baits. Each was clogged with ant corpses.

This reporter has lived in New York for decades and had previously never seen ants in her apartment. Yet there they were, up on the fifth floor of an elevator building in Manhattan, scurrying across the windowsill one day in May. Later in the week, they were spotted parading, single file, across the living room. Soon after, they began congregating under the couch.

City dwellers may assume that having ants is something that happens to other people — residents in the quiet woods of Westchester or the sleepy suburban shrubs of New Jersey. Ants mingling with the urbane in an urban environment, and so far from the ground, can be confusing. But it’s exciting to Samantha Kennett, a graduate student at Kennesaw State University in South Georgia in Dr. Clint Penick’s social insects lab. She studies urban ant ecology.



The ManhattAnt is a European immigrant and possibly arrived in New York by ship. Evelyn Freja for The New York Times

Specifically, Ms. Kennett studies an ant called *Lasius emarginatus*. This ant is not native to the United States; it is a European immigrant that possibly arrived by ship, like the Ellis Islanders of yore. It was first spotted living in New York in 2011. (Lots of other ants were found in a previous scientific survey, in 2006, but not *Lasius emarginatus*.)

Over the last decade, the teeny *Lasius emarginatus* — which has a reddish-brown thorax and a dark brown head and abdomen — has been absolutely *thriving* in New York, and has been nicknamed ManhattAnt.

“My research focuses on understanding how this ant, who is now one of the most common ants in New York City, has been able to be so successful, surviving in highly urban habitats,” said Ms. Kennett. She found *Lasius emarginatus* in the trees all up and down Broadway, as well as in midtown. “We found them in Times Square,” Kennett said. “They are everywhere.”

Including, apparently, the upper floors of apartment buildings. Like many ambitious New Yorkers, the ManhattAnt is upwardly mobile. “It forages in trees,” Ms. Kennett said. “It climbs a lot. They found it in second story buildings in Europe.” Now, as it expands its habitat, it appears to be scaling the structures of New York City.

Upon examining photographs, Ms. Kennett was able to confirm that Mrs. Russell Paige’s ants and this reporter’s ants were indeed *Lasius emarginatus*. Ms. Guhl did not have photos, could not be sure of the species that visited, and has since disposed of the bodies. “I wasn’t exactly looking super carefully at them,” said Ms. Guhl.

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Just how high *Lasius emarginatus* will climb is unknown. Ms. Kennett started an online initiative, Project ManhattAnt, and she hopes that New Yorkers will report their sightings to help scientists track the industrious insect as it silently spreads: “We’ve started to see populations pop up in New Jersey and as far as Long Island.”

Dr. Rob Dunn, a professor in the Department of Applied Ecology at North Carolina State University, whose team is credited with discovering *Lasius emarginatus* was living in New York, believes any ManhattAnts New Yorkers see inside are probably looking for water — and are likely not there to stay. This ant “nests in the ground,” he said. “It nests under logs and in all the studies we’ve done, it prefers to have some natural habitat.”



In a 2006 scientific survey, no *Lasius emarginatus* were found in New York. It is now the most common ant in the city and has been spotted in Times Square, all along Broadway, and inside apartments, several stories up. Evelyn Freja for The New York Times

Lasius emarginatus is not interested in your cookie crumbs, either, Ms. Kennett explained. “This is one of the things that I’m trying to figure out. When ants are living in really urban habitats, they tend to eat a lot of human foods and they’re able to shift their diets towards more human foods. But this ant, even though it’s living in the most urban habitat, does not appear to be consuming human foods.”

Ruthlessly, the ManhattAnt eats other insects — as well as a substance called honeydew, “a sugary secretion made by aphids and tree pests,” Ms. Kennett said.

The ManhattAnt may be a pioneer, but it is not invincible. Ms. Guhl, Mrs. Russell Paige, and yours truly used liquid ant baits and murdered the interlopers fairly quickly.

Jerry Walsh of Mayday Hardware in Prospect Heights warned that he did not recommend powerful ant baits for inside a home: “It’s a little too potent to use indoors because the ant does not drop dead on the spot. They will carry that poison wherever they travel. So you don’t want that going over your clean dishware. You’ll think that you have a 24 hour stomach virus when indeed what you’re experiencing is a mild case of stomach poisoning.”

At this point in the year, however, the ManhattAnt has calmed down. They are known to be busy foraging April through June, and less active in July.

Jesse Scavella of Evergreen Eco Pest Control wasn’t convinced that there was anything new happening and said that ants have always been “one of more the more consistent pests” in New York. And he didn’t seem fazed when informed that scientists had detected a relatively new species infiltrating the city, capable of scurrying up several flights.

“However,” he said gravely, “the rodent population has increased drastically. I’ve seen a big influx in rats.”