

LASIUS UMBRATUS COLONY JOURNAL

8 March 2009

The latest addition to my ants. I did promise myself that I would not get anymore ants as I have given many of my colonies away and wanted only to have 2 or 3 colonies. However, when the opportunity arose to have some of these ants I jumped at the chance.

Lasius umbratus are cousins of the common black garden ant, *Lasius niger*, and look very similar to *Lasius flavus* in that they are yellow. The queen is perhaps slightly smaller than a *Lasius niger* queen and looks more like a *Lasius flavus* queen in colouration.

These ants are interesting in that their queens, unlike their *Lasius niger* cousins, are unable to start colonies of their own. They are parasitic ants in that their newly mated queen commonly enters a *Lasius niger* colony and gradually makes her way into the depths of the nest, avoiding all hostile contact with the workers. She eventually dominates the colony to such an extent that the *niger* workers will turn on their own queen and kill her, accepting the *umbratus* queen as their own. The *umbratus* queen will then start to lay her own eggs which the *niger* workers will raise as their own sisters. Eventually, with no *niger* queen to replace the *niger* workers as they die out, the colony becomes solely *umbratus*.

Many of the workers of this colony died in transit (roughly about 30 or 40 of them), but fortunately there are about 30 workers still alive and well, and, much to my relief, the queen is looking healthy. All of the workers in this colony appear to be *Lasius niger*, indicating that this queen must be young as it would seem that she has only fairly recently 'acquired' this colony; there are none of her own native daughters yet. The size of the *niger* workers with her suggest that they are from an established colony, though due to the small numbers of them I guess only a small portion of the parent colony was taken by those that captured this colony in the first place. It could be, of course, that the *umbratus* queen was reared in captivity and a group of *niger* workers were given to her. Whatever the case it will be interesting to see when the queen will start producing her own workers.

I have placed them into the foraging tank of an old colony of mine which is attached to a glass nesting box via a plastic tube. They have yet to discover the tube and their new home. At the moment they are still huddling protectively around their queen at the far end of the glass the they arrived in. They are currently eating a piece of tuna.

14 March 2009

On Wednesday evening, this colony finally moved out of its temporary home (the test tube they arrived in) and streamed up into the foraging box. During the move I saw two things I had not noticed before; 1) the queen only has five legs! :-O She appears to be missing her front (left side) leg which causes her to walk with a bit of a limp. She found it fairly hard going walking up the plastic tube between the foraging box and the nesting box. It was quite funny to watch the workers assisting her; some by pulling on her jaws, others by pushing her backside. Not very

regal, is it! :0) 2) There were a lot of eggs and some first-instar larvae present. I did not notice these at first as they were well hidden at the far end of the tube. I am not sure whether these are remnant niger brood from the original colony, or umbratus brood laid by the umbratus queen. It will be interesting to see what species they are when they 'hatch'. As I type this, a group of workers are busily digging a tunnel, whilst others are surrounding the queen who is exposed on the surface of the sand. The slightest knock to the ant farm or even to the shelf it is situated on sends the workers into a frenzied search for threats to the queen.

05 April 2009

These ants are still living on the surface of the sand in the nesting box despite a lot of nest building going on. They forage a great deal and always seem to be hungry. The brood look well as does the queen. I can't wait for this lot of brood to 'hatch' to see whether they are brood from the original *Lasius niger* colony, or those of the umbratus queen herself.

25 April 2009

The queen has been churning out eggs like there's no tomorrow! (Maybe there isn't a tomorrow :-O I'd better go and rescue UNBL!) There are 3 fairly large piles of eggs, which tend to be stuck to the inside of the glass sides of the nesting box, above ground level (they are still nesting on the surface of the sand and it doesn't seem to bother the queen one bit. There are several piles of larvae and 3 or 4 cocoons still yet to eclose. The workers are constantly foraging and eating and I can see them feeding the larvae and queen on their return to the nest.

13 June 2009

There are so many larvae and eggs in this colony that they almost carpet the top of the sand on which they ants are still living. There have been about half a dozen yellow umbratus workers born, which are working alongside their niger step-sisters.