

Karen Telleen-Lawton » Serendipity: Ant Murder and Mayhem

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A colony of the little buggers takes over a newly installed water system controller and creates quite a mess

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 06.20.2009

Ants are not an endangered species, but they are interesting enough to have drawn me to their exhibit at the [National Museum of Natural History](#) in Washington, D.C., last week.

That's why I felt so betrayed when I returned home to face an ant invasion the likes of which I had never seen. I've drawn an important conclusion from this episode: There is no such thing as The Last Ant. By which I infer the following corollary: The local ant population is sustainable.

It began, as everything begins for me recently, with the Jesusita Fire. Beyond disrupting the lives of thousands of Santa Barbarans, it spelled mayhem for thousands — correct that: gigabillions — of animals from deer, bobcats and bears to gophers and ants. When we returned home from evacuation, we faced small ant wars for a couple of weeks, and continue to try to retake control of the house from mice and rats.

Meanwhile, we escaped the char for a long-planned, long weekend with our son in Washington. In the “World of Ants” exhibit, I couldn't help but be impressed at the insect's complex society, laid out in colonies enclosed in plastic. I was surprised there were so many jobs, each staffed by a different size of ant.

I returned home with a new appreciation for ants. Thankfully, our house remained ant-free. I went on with my life until this week, when I noticed that the drip system wasn't working. To be clear, our new drip irrigation system, which Nicholas Lebrero of Rincon Landscapes replaced after the Jesusita Fire so I could get water to my burned oaks and native plants, had inexplicably halted.



When I reached the controller box, the outside was a smoldering mass of ants. I quickly swept away a swath of them to open the controller door, and when I peered inside I almost gagged. An entire production colony was there, with tens of thousands of eggs and more activity than a beer store before the Fourth of July. I desperately wanted to just throw it away.

Instead, I vacuumed endlessly. After 20 minutes I got the courage to unscrew the innermost lid and found an unimaginable density of eggs and workers — not anything like the fascinating home life I witnessed behind plastic at the [Smithsonian](#). Now I go out once an hour to repeat the vacuuming process and scrub the insides with a damp toothbrush.

If I weren't so grossed out, I would report some interesting factoids, such as how fast they regroup and rebuild despite my destroying all in sight. Also, they seem to be using the architecture of the controller form and circuit boards to separate their activities: storing eggs, discarding frass (insect feces) and so forth. There are entire cubicles filled with frass. Either they're each hanging their little tushes over the edge of this space to "go," or some poor souls have the job of hand-carrying the frass to the garbage heap.

Anyway, it's not nearly as interesting as it could be, because they may have ruined my 10-day-old controller. That, my friends, is not sustainable.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*