**Title**

Free ride without raising a thumb: A citizen science project reveals the pattern of active ant hitchhiking on vehicles and its ecological implications

**Author names and affiliations**

Feng-Chuan Hsu1†, Gen-Chang Hsu1†, Ching-Chen Lee2, Chung-Chi Lin2, Chuan-Kai Ho1, Chin-Cheng Scotty Yang3

1 Institute of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, National Taiwan University, Taipei 10617, Taiwan

2 Department of Biology, National Changhua University of Education, Changhua 50007, Taiwan

3 Department of Entomology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA

† These authors contributed equally to this work and share first authorship

**Corresponding author**

Name: Chin-Cheng Scotty Yang

Email: scottyyang@vt.edu

**Abstract**

Species hitchhiking on human transportation objects can facilitate long-distance dispersal of organisms, allowing them to colonize new areas and thus increasing the probability of biological invasions. In Taiwan, there have been multiple observations of ants actively hitchhiking in motor vehicles, yet no study has examined this behavior. Here, we provide the first quantitive and qualitative report on ant hitchhiking using citizen science data collected from the social media Facebook. In total, 52 cases of ant hitchhiking on a car or scooter were reported between 2017 and 2023, and nine ant species were involved with seven being exotic. In particular, the invasive black cocoa ant (*Dolichoderus thoracicus*) is attributed to over half of the reported cases. The parking duration of the vehicles on which the ants hitchhiked ranged from several hours to over a month (30 cases occurred within a day). Moreover, more cases were reported in warm seasons (i.e., spring and summer) than in cold seasons (i.e., fall and winter). To our knowledge, this study is the first to document species, ant hitchhiking on vehicles and further examine this phenomenon. We encourage future studies to explore the abiotic and biotic factors that determine the success of hitchhiking events to better predict the spread of exotic ants and to develop effective management strategies for preventing their biological invasions.

**Keywords**

arboreal ants, biological invasions, citizen science, exotic species, human-mediated dispersal, species hitchhiking, transportation

**Introduction**

The increases in human transportation activities over the past few decades have had a wide range of impacts on human societies, living organisms, and the environment (Hulme 2009, Banks et al. 2015). One of the ecological consequences of human transportation is the transfer of organisms to a new area through mobile vehicles. Such “hitchhiking” can lead to long-distance dispersal of species beyond their natural ranges and potentially facilitate biological invasions (Ward et al. 2006, Von der Lippe and Kowarik 2007, Wilson et al. 2009, Auffret et al. 2014, Gippet et al. 2019).

Various terrestrial organisms, including both animals and plants, have been documented to hitchhike on vehicles. For example, plant seeds can disperse to new places by attaching to car and tire surface (Von der Lippe and Kowarik 2007, Ansong and Pickering 2013), and the seeds can remain on the vehicles for hundreds of kilometers under certain conditions (Taylor et al. 2012). Exotic earthworms have been introduced into the boreal forests of western Canada through vehicle transportation (Cameron et al. 2007). Many insects also hitchhike on vehicles. For instance, gypsy moth (*Lymantria dispar*) may lay eggs on the surface of shipping containers and trucks, and later arrive at the destination as larvae (Gray 2017, Meurisse et al. 2019). The tiger mosquito (*Aedes albopictus*) can travel in cars and move across provinces (Eritja et al. 2017).

Ants have been reported to disperse via human objects. For instance, fire ants and Argentine ants can be easily transported by agricultural machineries. Besides ants being passively attached to the vehicles, there have been observations of ants actively hitchhiking on vehicles (i.e., ants actively moving onto the vehicles) in Taiwan in recent years, which may facilitate their spread to new areas. However, no previous studies have ever investigated such an active hitchhiking behavior of ants, and its prevalence remains largely unknown. To better understand this phenomenon, we collected active ant hitchhiking cases in Taiwan from the social media Facebook via citizen science efforts and examined the spatial and temporal patterns of ant hitchhiking in Taiwan. Our aim is to provide the first official report of active ant hitchhiking on vehicles and discuss its potential ecological implications.

**Materials and Methods**

*Data collection and analysis*

In the initial phase of data collection (2017–2022), cases of ant hitchhiking on vehicles were gathered from Facebook group where general public shares a case involving their own vehicle intruded by ants. When a user responded, we asked the person to provide the parking date and location of the vehicles, the parking duration (the period between the time when the vehicle was parked and when the ant hitchhiking was observed), the vehicle type (car or scooter), the intended destination, the weather conditions, the surrounding environment (e.g., whether there was any tree nearby), and a photo of the ants for species identification. In the second phase of this study (2023), a dedicated Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/577051257470900) was established to systematically collect ant hitchhiking data from users. A post listing standardized survey questions was pinned on the top of the group page so that the observers can report the aforementioned information on hitchhiking cases in their posts in a consistent format. The data collected from the two phases were combined as the final data for subsequent analysis.

We categorized ant species as “arboreal”, “semi-arboreal”, or “ground-dwelling” based on their nesting sites and foraging habits. The difference in the number of reported cases in the four seasons (spring: March–May; summer: June–August; fall: September–November; winter: December–February) across the study period was analyzed using the Pearson's chi-square test. All recorded cases and the associated variables were provided in the Supplementary Data.

**Results**

In total, we received 52 cases of active ant hitchhiking on cars (*n* = 44) and scooters (*n* = 8) between 2017 and 2023, with the majority of them reported from central and northern Taiwan (Fig. 1). Nine species were recorded, among which two were native and seven were exotic (Table 1). Besides, among the recorded species, eight of them were arboreal or semi-arboreal ants (Table 1). One species in particular, the black cocoa ant (*Dolichoderus thoracicus*), constituted approximately 60% the reported cases (*n* = 31). The parking duration of the vehicles on which the ants hitchhiked ranged from less than half a day to over a month; more than half of the hitchhiking events (*n* = 30) occurred within a day. The number of reported cases differed significantly among the four seasons (χ2 = 25.69, *df* = 3, *P* < 0.001) and were higher in the spring and summer compared to the fall and winter (Fig. 2).

**Discussion**

Ant hitchhiking on vehicles can be a potential pathway for the spread of exotic species. In some cases, the travel distance between the parking location and the intended destination can be as long as a few hundred kilometers (e.g., from Nantou County in central Taiwan to Pingtung County in southern Taiwan), largely exceeding the dispersal distance achievable through natural movements. Furthermore, hitchhiking events can take place within several hours, during which the workers may carry eggs and larvae, along with queen(s), and move together to the vehicles. This suggests that ant hitchhiking is not a foraging behavior but rather a colonization attempt, potentially driven by high population pressure. In fact, the most frequently reported hitchhiking species, the black cocoa ant (*D*. *thoracicus*), exhibits notably high local densities in central Taiwan, which may act as a driving force underlying their dispersal and colonization of artificial structures (e.g., vehicles). Of particular significance is the black cocoa ant populations in central Taiwan has been demonstrated to be non-native (Hsu et al. 2022). Therefore, the role of vehicles in facilitating biological invasions cannot be underestimated, emphasizing the need for comprehensive monitoring and management efforts to mitigate the impact of invasive populations.

Various factors determine a successful ant hitchhiking event (Fig. 3). First, ants need to encounter vehicles, which largely depends on their searching or exploring behavior. Ants are generally more active under warmer conditions (Parr and Bishop 2022), potentially leading to more hitchhiking cases in spring and summer compared to fall and winter (Fig. 2). Moreover, species with different habitat associations may differ in their probability of encountering vehicles. Because of resource limitations within tree canopies (particularly nitrogen availability), arboreal ants typically exhibit frequent foraging activities and territorial patrolling (Yanoviak and Kaspari 2000, Hahn and Wheeler 2002, Hashimoto et al. 2010). Furthermore, there were plenty of instances where the vehicle's surface came into contact with the leaves and twigs of trees, thereby creating pathways for ants to move onto a vehicle and subsequently increasing the opportunities for hitchhiking.

Second, ants need to climb onto the vehicles after locating them. The metallic paint of vehicle surface could present a slippery barrier to ants, and only species with good climbing abilities are able to overcome this hurdle. Even if the ants come onto the vehicles directly from the trees via twigs or branches that touch the vehicles, they still need to be capable of moving on the vehicle surface. The climbing and moving performance of ants is determined by the morphological characteristics of the leg segments (Beutel et al. 2020). For instance, the fine hair arrays on the tarsus can increase the friction forces during vertical climbing (Endlein and Federle 2015). Arboreal ants have hooked pretarsal claws, well-developed adhesive pads, and fine tarsal hairs, allowing them to walk on smooth vertical substrates. On the other hand, ground-dwelling ants have straight pretarsal claws and lack adhesive pads as well as tarsal hairs, and therefore they are less capable of moving on smooth vertical surfaces (Orivel et al. 2001, Billen et al. 2017).

Third, ants need to be able to colonize the vehicles after moving onto them. The temperature on the surface and in the interior of the vehicles can increase dramatically, especially in the summer. However, a high proportion of the recorded cases still occurred during warmer seasons (Fig. 2), suggesting that the thermal tolerance of hitchhiking species plays a important role in their colonization attempts. Thermal tolerance also determines the survival of ants during the transportation process before they can arrive at the destination and disperse to new areas. For instance, a study on the invasive brown marmorated stink bug (*Halyomorpha halys*) demonstrated that its thermal tolerance is critical for surviving a trans-Pacific ship voyage (Nixon et al. 2019). Arboreal ants are generally more heat- and drought-tolerant compared to ground-dwelling ants (Hood and Tschinkel 1990, Bujan et al. 2016, Leahy et al. 2022), rendering them more likely to survive the high temperature of vehicles. Consequently, this may increase the propagule pressure and thus the probability of successful establishment at the destination (Lockwood et al. 2005, Simberloff 2009).

To our knowledge, this is the first report of ant hitchhiking on vehicles via citizen science. The overrepresentation of *D*. *thoracicus* in the recorded ant hitchhiking cases is mainly attributed to its high population densities in Taiwan (driving its tendency to colonize artificial structures), high exploratory behavior, good climbing ability, and high thermal tolerance. Our study nonetheless serves as the first efforts to characterize the patterns of ant presence in vehicles, and we have endeavored to engage the wider community in citizen science work as a cost-effective method for collecting hitchhiking data. Exotic ants often achieve high local population densities, which may drive them to engage more frequently in active hitchhiking on vehicles compared to native ants. We encourage future studies to examine the behavioral, morphological, physiological, and ecological traits of exotic species versus their native relatives to better understand the determinants underlying the success of hitchhiking events. Hopefully, this can help to predict the spread of exotic ants and to develop effective management strategies for preventing their biological invasions.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

**Author contributions**

Feng-Chuan Hsu and Gen-Chang Hsu conceived the ideas, collected the data, analyzed the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript; all authors revised the manuscript and approved the final version for publication.

**Data availability statement**

Data and code used in this manuscript are publicly available on Zenodo: DOI.

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**Tables and Figures**

Table 1. The status, habitat association, and the number of hitchhiking cases of the recorded ant species in this study

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Species | Status | Habitat association | Number of cases |
| *Polyrhachis dives* | Native | Arboreal | 2 |
| *Nylanderia* sp. | Native | Ground-dwelling | 1 |
| *Dolichoderus thoracicus* | Exotic  (cryptic invasion) | Arboreal | 31 |
| *Tapinoma melanocephalum* | Exotic | Semi-arboreal | 5 |
| *Paratrechina longicornis* | Exotic | Semi-arboreal | 5 |
| *Technomyrmex albipes* | Exotic | Arboreal | 4 |
| *Technomyrmex brunneus* | Exotic | Arboreal | 2 |
| *Anoplolepis gracilipes* | Exotic | Semi-arboreal | 1 |
| *Trichomyrmex destructor* | Exotic | Semi-arboreal | 1 |

Figure 1. (a) A map of the ant hitchhiking cases in Taiwan and (b–c) example photos of ant hitchhiking on vehicles.

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Figure 2. The number of ant hitchhiking cases in each season across the study period (spring: March–May; summer: June–August; fall: September–November; winter: December–February). Do a box plot?

Illustration

Figure 3. The determinants of a successful ant hitchhiking event. See *Discussion* for more details.