**Title**

Catch a free ride with me: A report on ant hitchhiking on vehicles in Taiwan and its ecological implications

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**Abstract**

Human transportation can facilitate long-distance dispersal of organisms, allowing them to colonize new areas and thus increasing the probability of biological invasions. Here, we report on 41 cases of ant hitchhiking on vehicles (cars and scooters) in Taiwan collected from the social media platform between 2017 and 2022. Among the eight hitchhiking ant species, six were invasive and constituted 93% (*n* = 38) of the cases. Moreover, about half of the cases (*n* = 22) were from the invasive species *Dolichoderus thoracicus*. The ants colonized the vehicles within a day in 60% of the cases (*n* = 25), while a few colonizations took over a month (*n* = 4). The hitchhiking events occurred more frequently during summer (June to September, *n* = 26) compared to spring (March to May, *n* = 10) or fall/winter (October to December, *n* = 5). To our knowledge, this is among the first studies of ant hitchhiking on vehicles. Further research on the factors underlying ant hitchhiking behavior and colonization attempts will provide useful implications for ant invasion management.

**Keywords**

ant colonization, biological invasions, citizen science, exotic species, human-mediated long-distance dispersal, species hitchhiking

**Introduction**

The definition of species hitchhiking and the importance of species hitchhiking for biological invasions.

Several species have been observed to hitchhike on vehicles and the past studies and their impacts.

Most reported cases were passive hitchhikers, but in Taiwan over the past few years, there have been anecdotal observations of an active hitchhiking by ants, and we were particularly interested in this behavior. In this study, we reported on cases of ant hitchhiking in Taiwan collected via citizen science efforts.

**Materials and Methods**

Data collection via citizen science efforts

Data analysis

**Results**

In total, we collected 45 cases of ant hitchhiking on cars (*n* = 39) and scooters (*n* = 6) between 2017 and 2023, with the majority of them from central and northern Taiwan (Fig. 1). Eight species were recorded, among which two were native and six were exotic (Table 1). In particular, one species, the black cocoa ant (*Dolichoderus thoracicus*), constituted over half of the reported cases (*n* = 26). The duration of ant colonization of vehicles ranged from several hours to a month, with around 65% (*n* = 28) of the cases taking place within a day. There were more cased reported in spring (March–May) and summer (June–August) compared to fall (September–November) and winter (December–February) (χ2 = 16.78, *df* = 3, *P* < 0.001; Fig. 2).

**Discussion**

To our knowledge, this is the first report on ant hitchhiking on vehicles. The hitchhiking events can take place as soon as within several hours, during which the workers would carry the queen and the eggs to the vehicles, suggesting that such hitchhiking is not a foraging behavior but rather a colonization attempt, potentially driven by high population pressure. In fact, the most reported hitchhiking species, the black cocoa ant (*D*. *thoracicus*), has high local densities, which may stimulate the dispersal and colonization of artificial structures.

A successful ant hitchhiking event involves various steps. First, ants need to encounter vehicles, which depends largely on their searching activities. For example, there were more reported cases in spring and summer compared to fall and winter (Fig. 2) as the ants may be more active under warmer conditions. Moreover, species with different habitat associations may differ in the probability of encountering vehicles. For instance, ground-dwelling ants search actively on the ground and thus are more likely to encounter vehicles compared to arboreal ants, which spend most of the time on trees. In fact, the eight reported hitchhiking species were all ground-dwelling ants. Interestingly, rubber odor could be an important chemical cue for ants to locate vehicles since the tires are the only part of the vehicles directly connected to the ground.

* Second, the ants need to be able to climb up onto the vehicles. The metal surface could be quite slippery and only species with good climbing ability can overcome this hurdle. This might have to do with the morphology and microstructure of the legs that increase the friction.
* Third, after the ants move onto the car, they need to be able to colonize it. Some species rely on natural habitat and cannot utilize artificial structure. In this case, the ants may not colonize the vehicles.
* Finally, after the ants decide to colonize the vehicles, they need to be able to tolerate the high temperature of the vehicle surface and interior before getting off at the destination and disperse to new areas. The thermal tolerance of species may play a critical role in this. The car color might be a factor affecting the colonization success or attempt.

Interestingly, over 90% of the cases were exotic species. Ant hitchhiking can be a potential pathway for the spread of exotic species, facilitating biological invasions. We encourage future studies to examine the climbing ability and thermal tolerance of exotic species versus their native relatives to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the success of hitchhiking, and develop management strategies accordingly to prevent the spread of exotic species.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank XXX for the constructive comments on the early draft of this manuscript.

This study was funded by (grant number YYY).

**Conflict of interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

**References**

**Tables and Figures**

Table 1. A summary of the hitchhiking ant species recorded in this study

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Species | Status | Cases |
| *Polyrhachis dives* | Native | 2 |
| *Nylanderia* sp. | Native | 1 |
| *Dolichoderus thoracicus* | Exotic | 26 |
| *Tapinoma melanocephalum* | Exotic | 5 |
| *Paratrechina longicornis* | Exotic | 4 |
| *Technomyrmex albipes* | Exotic | 4 |
| *Technomyrmex brunneus* | Exotic | 2 |
| *Anoplolepis gracilipes* | Exotic | 1 |

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

Season_barplot

Figure 2. The number of ant hitchhiking cases in each season (spring: March–May; summer: June–August; fall: September–November; winter: December–February).