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## A case of ants using bird feathers guarding the opening of their nest

**T. Kalaichelvan***

In the month of August 2009 (part of the monsoon season) in the campus of Maitri Baag in Bhilai (Chhattisgarh, India), it was observed that ants (*Oecophyla* sp.) were using crows' black feathers with their quill inserted into the mouth of the leafy bag like nest, while vanes of the feathers were projecting out of the nest. This observation was made on a small grown Peepal plant (*Ficus religiosa*). 10-15 ants were seen carrying a feather towards their nest, holding it by margins of its vane. When the feathers were removed from a nest, the surface layer of the quill part of the feather was seen eaten away. This association of fathers with ants nest was not seen when the monsoon was over, and rains had stopped.

No parallel observation in record could be found by the author, though he has tried to contact some eminent Myrmecologists. It is guessed that the association of the ants with feathers was primarily for nourishment, and dragging of feather into their nest had provided a shelter for the nest from rain drops; hence this association. The author would be obliged to learn about views of the readers. If my presumptions are correct, it is a rare instance of an insect using a tool.

***Zoo Supervisor, Maitri Baag Zoo, Bhilai Steel Plant, Bhilai, Chhattisgargh -490006.**
**Email: tkchelvan@rediffmail.com**

## An unusual intersex in Sambar *Rusa unicolor*

**T. Kalaichelvan[1] & TS Chhatri[2]**

In Maitri Baag Zoo (Bhilai, India) a female Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*), its sex as indicated by its external genitalia, has developed an antler-like structure on the right side of its head, with no such outgrowth on the other side. In Sambar, antlers are a secondary sexual feature, characteristic of the male sex. In the unusual female Sambar the asymmetrically developed antler-like growth has been continuously observed for three years, without its yearly dropping, which normally occurs in a male. In mammals secondary sexual features develop under influence of gonadial hormones circulating with blood. Hence gynandromorphs, known among insects, are not known among mammals. In insects, in absence of gonadial hormones, it is the genome of every body part, which directly influences development of secondary sexual molting of that part. Accidents in mitoses may result in a developing insect in some parts developing male-like features, while other parts have female characteristics, and thus a gynandromorphy may result.

In the Sambar, under study, it seems that a late somatic mutation, during development, has led to cells in a certain body part respond differently to the circulating gonadial hormones.

The only similar teratological development, known to the author of these lines, is that of a Roe Deer in Italy with a median unicorn-like horn, reported by Gilberto Tozzi, who has regarded it as due to a "genetic flaw" (AP News, June 12, 2009).
The author invites comments of readers on this note and his presumption.

**Reference:**
AP News, June 12, 2009- as reported in the daily Hitavada (Raipur Edition) 13th June 2009.

**[1]Zoo Supervisor, [2]AGM (Horti.), Maitri Baag Zoo, Bhilai Steel Plant, Bhilai, Chhattisgarh 490006, India. Email: tkchelvan@rediffmail.com**