

# Antsy in Madagascar

**A bushwhacking biologist unearths six-legged vampires, cannibals, and silk weavers in his quest to bring every ant on the planet into your home**

By Richard Conniff

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All Ant photographs courtesy California Academy of Sciences, April Nobile,  
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**STALWART SOLDIER:** *Cerapachys lividus*, whose direct ancestors were underfoot before *Tyrannosaurus rex* ruled the Earth, is built to pillage the nests of other species. As with all ants, males of the species mate and die, leaving the females to soldier on. Bowlegged, slow, and tough, a *Cerapachys* forager can drag a giant pupa below her even as would-be defenders lock their jaws around her legs.

In the bleak hour before dawn in southeastern Madagascar, biologist Brian Fisher and a team of five field assistants stand outside a grand, but at this moment lifeless, French colonial railroad station. The passenger train will not be running today, due to some quirk of developing-world travel. When the first railroad workers arrive, Fisher consults with them in French and Malagasy, pointing to a roadless site on a topographic map. A few hours later, suitable friendships having been formed, a freight train squeals to a stop at a rendezvous outside of town, a plume of steam drifting back from the locomotive. Fisher and his crew pile tents, machetes, headlamps, mesh sacks, pan traps, cookware, and a basket of live chickens into an empty boxcar, which carries them thumpeta-thumpeta out into the hills. Or rather, THUMPeta-THUMPeta. These battered old boxcars have no springs. Hanging out the open door, Fisher cannot help grinning, jumping a freight train being a forgotten childhood fantasy. For anybody else, this would qualify as an adventure.

And for Fisher? Among other hazards of tropical biology, he has endured a leech up his nose and

nematodes "moving fast" under his skin. He has suffered leishmaniasis—and treatment for it with the heavy metal antimony. Once, in Gabon, he collapsed with malaria. A Bakwele Pygmy woman saved his life by carrying him 18 miles on her back to get an injection. He has posed as a Frenchman among Muslim money changers who had just learned about the U.S. invasion of Iraq. And he has been caught in the middle of a war in the Central African Republic. To escape the fighting, he had to cross a river between countries. Border guards picked him up, but he got away from them and joined up with a missionary pilot. Then he persuaded Air France to let him board a flight to Paris without travel documents or a ticket. As he negotiated this feat, he was dressed in blood-smearred clothes and was using a snake stick as a cane because one unshod foot was grossly swollen with elephantiasis. In his other hand he carried a greasy paper bag of barbecued goat meat just purchased from a street vendor because he was starving.

"I'm glad all my work is in Madagascar now," he says mildly, "because the African work was slowly killing me."

Most people would not risk death and misery even for a fortune. Fisher does it for ants. A slight, bearded 41-year-old researcher at the California Academy of Sciences, he has an unstoppable, infectious enthusiasm for ant biology and behavior. He is convinced that if people knew what they were looking at—if they had access to basic information about the ants living in their backyards, not to mention those at the opposite ends of the Earth—they would be as gung ho about them as he is.

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