



A Checklist of Ants in VC55 - Leicestershire and Rutland

1st Edition

Compiled by Gavin Gamble - May 2020

Introduction

Despite being the most numerous insect on the planet, ants are drastically under-recorded at both a National and International level with most records derived from a band of dedicated entomologists, myrmecologists and ant enthusiasts. Ant abundance is perhaps their downfall; they are often overlooked and yet, as ecosystem engineers, they are of great ecological importance. Seed spreaders, habitat creators, corpse removers, soil turners, butterfly farmers, beetle harbourers, bird and mammal food...the benefits of ants on the wider environment are numerous and complex.

VC55 is no exception and there is much that can be done to improve recording in Leicestershire and Rutland. Most of the work on ants in VC55 was undertaken by ant pioneer Harry Broughton who recorded ants and ant behaviour across Leicestershire and Rutland meticulously for over 30 years until his death in 2007. Since this period gaps have been filled by VC55 Hymenoptera County Recorder Helen Ikin, Steve Woodward and more casually by many of our regular biological recorders. Records in contrast to other invertebrates in our region, however, do make for relatively slim pickings. Our most common ant, *Lasius niger*, holds only 138 records on NatureSpot and 522 VC55 records in total, yet it is likely that this ant is present in most Leicestershire and Rutland gardens, parks, green spaces, towns, villages, pavements, roadsides and beyond.

Whilst it is true that most ants require detailed examination to correctly determine their species and making this information accessible to casual observers presents a significant challenge – a challenge I am undertaking with the production of the forthcoming VC55 Ant Atlas - there are still gains to be made from simple observation and recording of even our most common species.

Whilst many casual observations of ants fail to stray beyond 'black, red and yellow', perhaps surprisingly the ants of Leicestershire and Rutland are currently well-represented by 24 species of 7 genera as outlined below. A significant number of these are uncommon and perhaps one now locally extinct. It is not unreasonable to assume that greater recording effort will reveal a number of those species currently considered rare or uncommon in VC55 to be far more widespread than the data indicate at present. It is also feasible that at least a further two species may be found within VC55 in the not-too-distant future as climate change continues to push those with a more southerly distribution northwards – a pattern that has already been observed in the surrounding southern counties. In fact, VC55 is an interesting location for ant fauna in the UK, often forming the boundary of species with a mainly northern and mainly southern distribution. Indeed there is visible crossover between populations, with *Formica lemani*, a predominantly northern species and *Formica fusca*, a predominantly southern species both occurring here.

The below check-list is exactly that. A minor introduction to all of the ants presently found in VC55 with some notes on status and distribution. In the coming months further work will be undertaken to assist biological recorders with ants in Leicestershire and Rutland. Whilst I hope to complete the Ant Atlas of VC55 before the year is out this may be a little ambitious in the present climate. Prior to that, a new page with information, guidance and links to useful resources, online keys and literature will be added to the NatureSpot website to assist those looking to record ants in obtaining more accurate identification.

The VC55 Checklist

Formica				
Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Formica cunicularia</i>	N/A	8	22.07.1997	Nationally restricted to southern England though common where habitat is suitable in these counties. Rare in VC55 with nearly all records from Ketton and Empingham.
<i>Formica fusca</i>	Negro Ant	99	05.04.2020	Common in central and southern England and Wales. Uncommon in Scotland and northern England where this species is largely replaced by <i>Formica lemani</i> . Local in VC55 with most records from NW Leicestershire though recent recording has revealed colonies in southern and eastern Leicestershire which indicate this species is probably under-recorded.
<i>Formica lemani</i>	N/A	21	07.09.2019	Common nationally but local in VC55 where it is largely restricted to NW Leicestershire. <i>F. lemani</i> is mainly northern in UK distribution. Leicestershire generally represents the southern edge of its range except in SW England and parts of the east coast.
<i>Formica rufa</i>	Red Wood Ant	7	03.06.2013	Confined to England and Wales and suffering a contraction in range in northern, central and eastern England but still locally common and even expanding in southern England. A large population was known from Buddon Wood but following tree clearing and burning this population no longer exists. Nest mounds were previously known from the island at Swithland reservoir and land at Quorn Hall but neither site is home to nests now. Most records for VC55 are museum records from the 1950's. Lone workers were taken from Beacon Hill in 2004 and Morley Quarry, Shepshed in 2011. A further individual was taken from playing fields in Shepshed in 2013. No nests have been located at any of these sites and given their conspicuous nature it would be reasonable to conclude that this species is probably extinct as a viable breeding population in VC55.

Hypoponera

Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Hypoponera punctatissima</i>	N/A	9	14.09.1985	Isolated records from England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland. There is debate as to whether this species is native, with most living populations found in hot-houses and greenhouses though there is evidence of its presence in northern Britain dating back 1500 years, whilst some populations still persist far from human habitation. Most VC55 records are museum records whilst the two most recent are from greenhouses within the Leicester University Botanic Gardens in Oadby.

Lasius

Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Lasius alienus</i>	N/A	1	30.05.1987	Nationally local with most records from central and southern England. This species was divided into 3 in 1992 and most historic records should be regarded as <i>Lasius alienus</i> agg. Rare or rarely recorded in VC55.
<i>Lasius brunneus</i>	Brown Tree Ant	3	03.05.2020	Nationally local and rare or rarely recorded in VC55. First VC55 record from 2019. This species is often overlooked and it is likely that its VC55 status will change with better recording effort.
<i>Lasius flavus</i>	Yellow Meadow Ant	361	26.04.2020	Common nationally and in VC55
<i>Lasius fuliginosus</i>	Jet Ant	3	10.04.2020	Nationally local and rare or rarely recorded in VC55. This species is not currently threatened. However, the abundance of their host species and the availability of suitable, undisturbed old trees, hedgerows and dead timber for nesting could become limiting factors.
<i>Lasius mixtus</i>	N/A	4	25.03.2005	Nationally this species is not regarded as scarce or threatened. Currently rare or rarely recorded in VC55 though it is likely to be far more common than currently considered - largely subterranean habits mean this species is simply drastically under-recorded in VC55 at present.

<i>Lasius niger</i>	Small Black Ant	522	09.05.2020	Common in southern Britain with dappled and limited distribution in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Very common in VC55 – possibly Leicestershire and Rutland’s most common species of ant.
<i>Lasius sabularum</i>	N/A	6	12.07.2007	Records for this species nationwide are uncommon most like due to their underground habits, though this species is not regarded as scarce or threatened. Uncommon and rarely recorded in VC55.
<i>Lasius umbratus</i>	N/A	8	08.07.2013	Nationally common though currently considered uncommon in VC55 for much the same reasons as <i>Lasius mixtus</i> . largely subterranean habits mean this species is simply drastically under-recorded in VC55 at present. This is generally the host species for <i>Lasius fuliginosus</i> .
* <i>Lasius platythorax</i>	N/A	*	*	*This species was split from <i>Lasius niger</i> in 1991 by Seifert based on acute morphological differences coupled with distinctly different habitat preferences. Extreme care is required to properly identify specimens. Much work is required nationally to properly record distribution for this species and records of <i>L. niger</i> prior to 1991 may no longer be accurate as a result. There are currently no VC55 records however work is underway to rectify this. Nationally <i>L. platythorax</i> may be as common as <i>L. niger</i> and is likely to be common in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Leptothorax				
Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Leptothorax acervorum</i>	Slender Ant	32	01.03.2020	Common and widely distributed throughout the UK. In VC55 this ant also has an even distribution across the county but thanks to its small size, tendency to nest in wood cavities and a fairly sedentary nature this species is currently overlooked and under-recorded in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Myrmecina

Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Myrmecina graminicola</i>	Grass Ant	1	22.09.1987	Nationally scarce but common to local in southern England. Rare in VC55.

Myrmica

Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Myrmica lobicornis</i>	N/A	7	30.05.2003	National status unknown - A shortage of recent records is probably a result of low recording effort, particularly in upland northern England and Scotland where it is expected to be more plentiful than indicated. Rare or rarely recorded in VC55.
<i>Myrmica rubra</i>	Common Red Ant	241	24.04.2020	Common Nationally and in VC55.
<i>Myrmica ruginodis</i>	N/A	102	31.03.2020	Very common Nationally and common in VC55.
<i>Myrmica sabuleti</i>	N/A	39	06.05.2020	Nationally locally common with most records from southern England. Evenly scattered distribution in VC55 and considered uncommon.
<i>Myrmica scabrinodis</i>	N/A	54	06.05.2020	Common throughout the British Isles. Apparently uncommon in Leicestershire and Rutland though greater recording is likely to prove otherwise.
<i>Myrmica Schencki</i>	N/A	1	06.05.2020	Nationally Scarce (Nb) with most records from central and south-east England. The 6 th May 2020 record is the first reliable record for VC55 and subsequently this species is considered rare in Leicestershire and Rutland.
<i>Myrmica sulcinodis</i>	N/A	2	17.08.2011	largely restricted to well-drained upland heather moors in south west and northern England and in Scotland. It also occurs locally on some lowland heaths in southern England. Rare in VC55 with both records from NW Leicestershire.

Stenamma

Species	Common Name	Records	Latest Record	Notes on Status & Distribution
<i>Stenamma westwoodii</i>	N/A	1	01.04.1980	Not regarded as scarce or threatened but this should possibly be reviewed owing to its apparent rarity and the fact that the Britian appears to have the main population worldwide. BWARS state that 'up until the 1990s it was thought to be the only species of its genus in the British Isles. It is now clear that <i>S. debile</i> is much more common and older records for <i>S. westwoodii</i> are now treated as <i>S. westwoodii</i> agg and in fact most older records are likely to be <i>S. debile</i> .' This means that the only VC55 record is more likely to be <i>Stenamma debile</i> which is common in South-East England though apparently absent from VC55.