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“Farmers, Warriors, Builders: The Hidden Life of Ants” Opens May 30 at Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History

Humans are not the only species on Earth that hunt, farm and fight for resources. Some ants grow their own food, just like farmers. Other ants build highways that can be seen from the air. Some large ant colonies go to war with each other. Explore the fascinating world of ants in “Farmers, Warriors, Builders: The Hidden Life of Ants” opening Saturday, May 30, at the National Museum of Natural History and continuing through Oct. 10. The Ants Family Festival will take place May 30, 1 - 4 p.m., at the museum.

The exhibition will feature 39 incredible close-up photographs by Mark W. Moffett, photographer and Smithsonian research associate. “Ants” also will include a live leaf-cutter ant colony from the lab of Ted Schultz, the museum’s curator of ants, as well as a 6-foot-tall cast of an underground ant colony that was collected by Walter Tschinkel, who studies ant-nest architecture at Florida State University.

The exhibition also will feature a spectacular portrait of Edward O. Wilson, renowned biologist, painted by artist Nelson Shanks, on public view for the first time. The commanding painting shows Wilson in his office at Harvard University, surrounded by items symbolic of his research – microscope, magnifying glass, books and a large wooden ant model. The 5-by-5 foot oil on canvas, painted in 2008, is generously on loan from Ian and Annette Cumming.

More than 20 ant species are represented in Moffett’s photographs, including a weaver ant scouting the tree canopy in search of food, marauder ants overwhelming and killing a frog for food, a fire ant and an Argentine ant fighting over a dead grasshopper and a bulldog ant tending larvae.

Moffett has been exploring and documenting the world of ants since his childhood, from his backyard in Wisconsin to the fields and jungles of Asia and South America. With an abundance of curiosity and a strong sense of adventure, he goes to where the ants live and waits patiently.

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“I use my camera as a microscope to watch ants,” said Moffett. “The trick is not to be seen, to catch the ant in everyday behavior. You may only get one chance. Like any animal, ants are easiest to photograph when preoccupied.”

The exhibition is made possible through the Windland Smith Rice Nature’s Best Photography Fund.

The Ants Family Festival will include the opportunity to talk with Smithsonian scientists about their ant research and see a slide presentation by Moffett about ants and macro-photography. Various children’s arts-and-crafts activities will be offered, including face painting and mask making. The festival is free and open to the public.

Created in 1881, the U.S. National Collection of Ants at the Smithsonian is the first large collection of ants in North America. Today, the collection contains more than 1 million specimens representing more than 5,000 ant species and more than 1,700 type specimens. The collection is worldwide in coverage and is especially strong in North American, Central American and South American species.

Like all the U.S. National Insect Collections housed at the National Museum of Natural History, the Collection of Ants is part of the scientific infrastructure for scientific research. The Collection is essentially a vast scientific research and reference tool, used every day by scientists in the United States and around the world to identify known species, to describe new species, to understand the distributions of species in space and time, and in the case of the type collection, to permanently document newly discovered species. The collection supports raw data for research in the realms of evolution, ecology, biodiversity, conservation, agriculture, forestry and other disciplines, and it is used on a daily basis to identify pest species at our nation’s ports of entry, intercepting them before they invade and cause damage.

The National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W. in Washington, D.C., is the most visited natural history museum in the world. For more information about the museum, go to www.mnh.si.edu.

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