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Close encounters with intriguing ants

by Janet Heber

How many of you readers have had a "close encounter" with ants?

We tend to categorize these insects as little nuisances that find their way into kitchens or spoil picnics. But, an ant colony is interesting if observed without harmful intent.

On your next walk through the desert, look for an anthill. If you notice seeds around the hill, you have come upon harvester ants. They collect seeds and carry them to underground storehouses to keep them dry for the colony's food source. Empty seed pods are carried to the surface and left near the entrance.

After a good rain, you might notice grass growing around the ant hill. This is due to the seed storage just below the surface.

It is interesting to watch ants diligently removing stones from inside their colony. They will labor all day, cleaning their tunnels and compartments, dropping stones at the edge of their entrance to form a "hill." They are smart enough to remain underground during our hot summer afternoons.

I have seen injured or exhausted ants being carried, pushed and dragged back to the opening of their anthill and taken underground. I wonder if it is for rest and recuperation or are they going to become a meal?

Ants do become meals for some birds and for horny toads. I once watched a small horny toad, about 2½ inches long, sit by an anthill and catch ants with its tongue. It ate so many that I lost count! I no longer use pesticides to keep the ant population in check. The horny toads do such a good job all by themselves!

So the next time you see an anthill taking shape in your yard, don't reach for the bug spray. They have natural predators that will keep a good balance to their population.

Take a few minutes to observe the ants in action, and you too might become fascinated by these little creatures that are part of this desert place.

Sequel to "Ode to a Saguaro" by Edith Page, as printed last September in the *Black Mountain News*:

"On August 7, 1983, my Old Friend a saguaro was struck by lightning and in the days that followed, life slowly ebbed away. But then, did it — or was it to be reborn?"

A "young" saguaro standing nearby appeared to observe the passing of a giant friend and now has taken up the challenge to offer beauty, grace and humility to those who will stop and reflect.

This "youngster" of perhaps 50 years old came into bloom Monday, April 16.

Is this not early for a saguaro? Is it saying, "Me first, I want to honor my Old Friend who taught me so much"?"

Reader questions and comments can be sent to Conservation Committee, P.O. Box 4212, Cave Creek, AZ 85331.