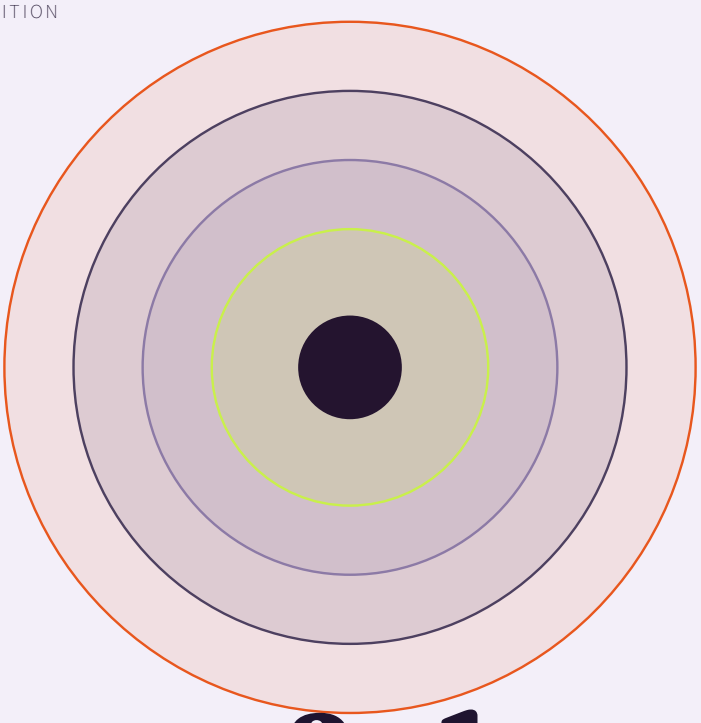


Planet of the Ants: The Hidden Worlds and Extraordinary Lives of Earth's Tiny Conquerors

A reading of the book by Susanne Foitzik and Olaf Fritsche (2021)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Planet of the Ants: The Hidden Worlds and Extraordinary Lives of Earth's Tiny Conquerors, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Susanne Foitzik is a German evolutionary biologist at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz who studies ants, especially the raiding species that steal brood from other colonies. She wrote this book with the science journalist Olaf Fritsche, and it was translated from German into English in 2021. Its central idea is that an ant colony works as one body, a superorganism, with a queen that lays the eggs and workers that split up the labour. From there it tours how ants talk in scent, farm fungus, tend aphids, march as army ants, spread as invasive supercolonies and go to war. Foitzik mixes this natural history with stories from her own fieldwork and lab.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

An ant colony makes more sense as one animal than as a crowd of many.

The book leans on the idea of the superorganism. The queen does the reproducing, the workers do the feeding, building and defending, and no single worker can carry on the colony's life alone. Selection works on the colony as a whole, much as it works on a body made of many cells.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

No ant gives orders, not even the queen.

The queen is an egg layer, not a ruler. What the colony does comes out of thousands of small, local choices: each worker reacts to what it meets and smells nearby. Nobody holds the plan, and the colony still acts as if it had one.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Ants talk mostly in chemistry.

Scent marks a trail to food, raises an alarm and tells a nestmate from a stranger. Each colony carries its own smell on the body, which is why a foreign ant is spotted at once. Much of the book's drama, from raids to invasions, turns on who can read or fake that smell.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A trail is a decision the colony makes by walking it.

Ants that find food lay scent on the way home, others follow the strongest scent, and each trip strengthens the trail. Because the scent fades, routes that stop paying off are slowly forgotten. Feedback plus forgetting is enough to choose a route with no one choosing.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Ants were farmers and herders millions of years before people were.

Leafcutter ants do not eat the leaves they carry. They chew them into a bed for a fungus, and the fungus is their food. Other ants guard aphids and drink the sugary honeydew they give off, much as a farmer keeps a herd.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Army ants carry their home with them.

Army ant colonies do not keep a fixed nest. They move through the forest in huge raiding columns, and at rest the workers link their bodies into a living shelter around the queen and brood. It is the superorganism at its most literal.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

An invasive ant wins by not fighting itself.

In its new range the Argentine ant forms supercolonies: nests spread over vast stretches of land that treat each other as family. Workers that would normally fight a neighbour cooperate instead, so their numbers overwhelm native ants. Southern Europe has one that runs along thousands of kilometres of coast.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Some ants live by stealing other ants' children.

Slave-making ants raid the colonies of small Temnothorax ants, some of which nest inside acorns, and carry off their brood. The stolen young grow up working for the raiders. Foitzik has spent much of her career studying this arms race between raiders and hosts.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Simple rules, many hands and a little forgetting can solve hard problems.

No ant understands the colony, yet colonies find food, divide work and defend territory well. The lesson for people is not that we should act like ants. It is that good group results can come from good local rules, honest signals and the freedom to drop what no longer works.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Find a colony near you
- [ ] Run the crumb test outdoors
- [ ] Start a one-page field notebook
- [ ] Get help naming what you find
- [ ] Name one trail nobody decided

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Watch an ant trail for ten minutes
- ◯ Let one old trail fade each month
- ◯ Leave clear traces for the next person

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Find a colony near you

Look along pavement cracks, under a flat stone in a park or at the foot of a tree.

Note where the nest is so you can come back, and put any stone back exactly as you found it.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Run the crumb test outdoors

Put a small crumb about two metres from a nest entrance outside.

Time how long until the first ant finds it and how long until a line of ants forms between crumb and nest.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Start a one-page field notebook

Head a page with date, place and weather, then sketch what you see for ten minutes.

A rough drawing makes you look harder than a photo does.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Get help naming what you find

Post a clear photo to a citizen-science app such as iNaturalist and ask for an identification.

Knowing the species turns a brown ant into a story you can look up.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Name one trail nobody decided

Write down one habit in your team or home that grew because everyone kept following it, such as a weekly meeting or a way of filing things.

Ask whether it still leads to food.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Watch an ant trail for ten minutes

Once a week, stop at a trail and just watch.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Let one old trail fade each month

Pick one recurring meeting, subscription or chore that you keep only out of habit and stop it for a month.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Leave clear traces for the next person

When you finish a piece of shared work, leave a two-line note where the next person will look: what you did and where to go next.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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December 2026

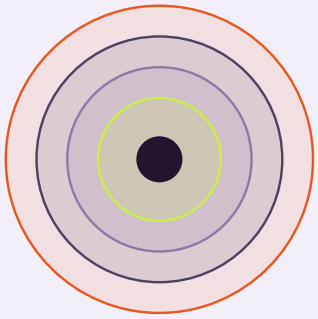
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28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



No ant is in charge, and the colony still finds the short way home.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER SUSANNE FOITZIK AND OLAF FRITSCHE