Zombie Ants!

A strange fungus turns ants into zombies before feeding on their brains!

By Elizabeth Aaron

This ant is being attacked by a killer fungus.

A killer is on the loose! It grabs an unsuspecting victim and invades its brain. Then it transforms the victim into a zombie before feeding on it.

This may sound like a scene from a horror movie, but it's not. Scientists have discovered that

this scenario plays out in nature almost every day. It involves a killer fungus that has a thing for ant brains.

A Killer Fungus Among Us

A fungus is an organism that survives by breaking down and soaking up nutrients from other living things. Most fungi simply graze on other organisms. But a few—like the Ophiocordyceps fungus—actively hunt and kill them.

No Brain, No Gain

According to scientists, this killer fungus produces tiny structures called spores, which it scatters throughout the rain forest floor. Sometimes, an ant brushes against one of these spores. The spore then latches on to the ant and leaks chemicals into the insect's head. The chemicals take over the ant's brain, turning it into a zombie! The fungus can now control the ant's movements.

Under the fungus's control, the zombie ant moves away from its colony. It travels to a damp, humid area, which is the perfect environment for the fungus to grow. Once there, the fungus spreads through the ant's

body and eats the insect's insides. *Eew*!

The fungus grows a long stalk that bursts from the ant's head.

The Killer Attacks Again

The horror isn't over yet. Once the fungus has finished its meal, it grows a long stalk that bursts out of the ant's head. The stalk releases more spores, which scatter like seeds. These spores spread to nearby ants, and the zombie-making process starts again.

Coming Soon . . . to a Forest Near You?

So, can you expect to see these ants in your neighborhood? "This particular fungus lives in rain forests in Brazil," says David Hughes, a scientist who studies the fungus. "But you never know. There might be similar fungi in other rain forests around the world. We just haven't discovered them yet."

Hughes may not know if there are similar fungi species, but he is certain about something: "This whole thing is stranger than fiction!"

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