Ants: Behaviour and Ecology
Summary of Talk
Brian gave a talk about the life history of ants, their fascinating behaviour, their ecology, and why conservationists should be interested in them. He also pointed out some areas where amateur naturalists can make new discoveries about ants.

Brian began the talk by explaining the anatomy of ants and the similarity to bees. He talked about the number of species of ants, which is comparable to that of birds - there are 9500 species of ants, 50 species in the UK, including a new species discovered in the UK in 1998. Brian also explained the life cycle of ants and the interaction between workers, queens and males. Fascinating behaviour came to light, such as the fact that one species of ant can invade another species of ant, kill the queens and get the other species of worker ants to work for them. However, ants should not have a bad press, as they protect plant species from damage by other insects (they milk the extrafloral nectaries from such plants as bracken) and have a bigger impact on the biomass of tropical forests than mammals and birds. They are also important as plant pollinators and are collectors, transporters and planters of seeds. They also have a symbiotic relationship with some insects – they can be both predators and "shepherds". They are crucial for the survival of some species such as the rare Large Blue Butterfly – where they protect the caterpillars and take them back to their nest, where they collect the sugar solution from the caterpillars and the caterpillars, in return, eat the ant larvae!

Brian gave tips on how to study ants – such as placing a teaspoon in the nest of a yellow meadow ant nest to check for different species of ants living together and how to use golden syrup to attract and identify species within an area.

And did you know the oldest queen ant in activity lived for 29 years? - compare that to an adult mayfly! The secret life of ants was unveiled.