

# PREFACE

I grew up imagining I might someday go to a faraway tropical forest as an explorer. I imagined that in faraway places big new discoveries were still possible, discoveries of great and hidden empires. I was lucky enough to go to such places and even to make a discovery here and there. But as I have gotten older, I have discovered something even more fantastic. I have discovered that great and poorly explored empires can be found not just in the deepest jungles but also in backyards. New species and even whole societies remain to be studied in the dirt beneath our feet.

Among the least explored empires are those of the ants. Ants live nearly everywhere. They do not appear to have made it to outer space, but it seems only a matter of time. Some kinds of ants have been very well studied, but just as for beetles, mites, spiders, and other arthropods, most have not. That is why the tropical explorer Andrea Lucky and I, along with a large number of colleagues, started a project called the School of Ants.

In creating the School of Ants, we aimed to give kids and adults around the United States (and now in parts of Italy and Australia) the wherewithal to go into their backyards and collect ants in order to document where ants of different species live. The project is new, but already the discoveries have been big. One boy in Washington State discovered an ant species living in his backyard that was thought to live only in the southeastern United States, for example.

But knowing which species live where is just a starting point. Having found the empires of the ants, the real challenge is to spend the time necessary to learn their ways. The good news is that for each of the most common ant empires in backyards, major discoveries are still possible. This is what I wish I had known as a kid. I wish I had known that instead of (or simply before) heading away to trop-

ical forests to make new discoveries, I could have made them in my own backyard. But there is a catch.

The catch is that in order to make discoveries, one needs to know what is already known, where the last path ended and where a new one might begin. Before now, there has been no book describing what we know about the common ants of eastern North America. Most of what is written about the common ants describes how to kill them (which is a shame given that most common ants do no harm and offer a great deal of benefit to our yards and even our homes). But here, Dr. Eleanor, an ant biologist from Goldsboro, North Carolina, tells their stories. These stories are fun, but they are also something more; they are a clear indication of where the paths end in our understanding of these common species. Some of the ants Dr. Eleanor writes about are relatively well known, but most are not, and even those that are well known await major discoveries.

I wish I had had *Dr. Eleanor's Guide* when I was young. I would have taken it—along with a bunch of glass jars, a shovel, a snake stick, and my other explorer's gear—out into the forest behind my house. With book in hand, I would have tried to add new information to the chapters. This is what I hope you do, because the truth is that each of Dr. Eleanor's funny stories about the most ordinary of our ants is just the beginning, and Dr. Eleanor needs your help to add new information. Perhaps you'll even help start a new chapter about a previously undiscovered species! And so go forth, young reader, and see what you can find.

*Rob Dunn*