

First Report of the Exotic Ant, *Pheidole obscurithorax* Naves (Hymenoptera: Formicidae), Attacking a Hatchling Chicken¹

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Pheidole obscurithorax Naves (Hymenoptera: Formicidae) is one of several species of ants, including the Argentine ant, *Linepithema humile* Mayr, and the imported fire ants, *Solenopsis invicta* Buren and *S. richteri* Forel, that are native to areas along the Paraguay River in Argentina and Paraguay and that have been introduced into the United States via the ports of Mobile, New Orleans, and Pensacola (Naves 1985, Insecta Mundi 1: 53-90; Storz and Tschinkel 2004, J. Ins. Sci. 4:12). *Pheidole obscurithorax* was first discovered in the U.S. by E. O. Wilson in 1950 within 1 km of the ship docking area in Mobile, AL (Naves 1985; Wilson 2003, *Pheidole* in the New World, a Dominant, Hyperdiverse Ant Genus. Harvard University Press). Since then, its range in the U.S. has expanded west into George and Jackson counties in southeastern Mississippi and east along the Gulf Coast to Tallahassee, FL, where it is associated with highly disturbed habitats, such as roadsides (Storz and Tschinkel 2004). Although *L. humile*, *S. invicta*, and *S. richteri* are notorious invasive organisms that negatively affect human endeavors and reduce biodiversity in the communities they invade, *P. obscurithorax* heretofore has not been shown to have any obvious effects on human activities nor to significantly reduce biodiversity.

However, on 29 May 2005 I observed *P. obscurithorax* attacking a chicken, *Gallus gallus* L., chick as it emerged from its egg on a free-range chicken farm near Barton (George Co.), MS. The egg was laid among various objects on the earthen floor, near an exterior wall of the chicken house. The *P. obscurithorax* colony was located in the soil on the outside of the wall, and both major and minor workers were traveling under the wall and attacking the hatching chick. Voucher specimens have been placed in the Mississippi Entomological Museum (Box 9,775, MSU, MS 39,762).

Whereas imported fire ants are known to attack newborn animals and hatchlings of various species of birds, this is first record of *P. obscurithorax* doing so. This is noteworthy because poultry farming is a major industry in Mississippi particularly in

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the southern third of the state, where *P. obscurithorax* is most likely to occur. Although the observed attack of *P. obscurithorax* on this chick did not take place in a typical commercial chicken house, this species should still be monitored in commercial settings to insure that it does not reach pest status. Because *P. obscurithorax* has shown the propensity to attack a hatchling chicken, the interactions of this species with native ground nesting birds and other wildlife also should be investigated.

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