

REFLECTIONS

By Steven Mirsky ■ Illustration by Mark Brewer



Urine Luck

IF YOUR BASEMENT FLOODS, DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME. WELL, OKAY, YOU CAN TRY IT, but it probably won't work and you'll most likely wind up making an appointment with a urologist.

What you shouldn't try is what nature, in its infinite wisdom, has designed a particular species of ant to do. When *Cataulacus muticus* finds its nest waterlogged, it pumps out its flooded digs in an unusual fashion. The ants meliorate by micturating; they make it better by making water; they're whizzes at whizzing. They don't get pissed off, they piss out, and that's how they save their homes.

Researchers from Frankfurt University observed the pithy behavior in the rain forests of Malaysia, where there is, as the name might imply, a lot of rain. *C. muticus* builds its nests in the hollow stalks of giant bamboo, a lovely locale but the equivalent of the downhill end of a housing development. When rain floods the stalks, the ants drink it up, leave the nest, and affirmatively answer the age-old question, "To pee or not to pee?" The researchers published their findings in the journal *Naturwissenschaften*, which sounds suspiciously like the ant habit of naturally wissing aus der bamboo schaftens.

This discovery is just a drop in the bucket. The researchers also compared the excretory ants with two other species in the same genus, which live in places far less likely to flood. The other ants did not exhibit the kidney capability of *C. muticus*, so the scientists conclude that urinary bailing is a specific adaptation to living in easily deluged bamboo. *C. muticus* is thus unique.

Not bad for a little pissant.