

Bird Safety Corner

Ants

One of the most common issues that comes up in bird safety chats is how to safely take care of various flying, crawling, and walking pests without harming one's birds. Since this is a big topic, I'll be devoting more than one column to it. First I'll focus on one of the most common indoor pests - ants.



Ants are an inevitable part of life and a major part of most any ecosystem. They mix and aerate soil and eat small insect pests. Most people don't have a problem with them outdoors other than species such as fire ants in the south, which deliver a painful bite, and carpenter ants, which tunnel in wood. When they invade your house, however, particularly the bird room, the question is how to safely protect your birds. First and foremost is finding out where the ants are entering the house and **plugging and sealing holes and cracks**. This is far preferable to using poisons, which is the knee-jerk reaction of many people. Once you seal access holes, you can spray around the outside base of the house to discourage further entrance. You should also look for the ant trail inside your house - the invisible line of scent the ants put down leading to the food in your house. If you disrupt this trail by scrubbing it with soap and water or baking soda, writing over it with chalk, spraying it with vinegar, or overlaying it with a spice like cinnamon or chili powder, the ants will look elsewhere for food.



In the meantime, how do you deal with ants already in your house? They are unlikely to attack or bite your bird (at least those ants in the northern part of the country), but they might eat your bird's food and scare them (especially cockatiels during the night). Obviously you can capture and release them outdoors or kill them outright. One method of killing ants other than direct squashing is to spray them with **soapy water** or **water that has citrus peels, citrus oil, or mint oil** in it. This kills ants on contact and is not generally toxic to your birds if they ingest the water and/or the ants. While parrots

are mostly herbivores, they do eat occasional insect matter to supplement the protein in their diet. Ants are not a favorite of most birds, however, with the exception of woodpeckers, and are said to taste bad due to the formic acid they produce (perhaps birds make yucky faces?). But that doesn't mean your parrot might not decide to try to taste one, so using one of these sprays at least ensures that the ants are safe to eat. The downside of directly killing ants is that more ants may keep coming in the house and no poison is taken back to the nest. Squashed ants also give off a scent that attracts other ants, so this is not a good solution.

If you want to keep ants from crawling into your bird's cage, there are several safe methods you can use. You can place the **cage legs in small bowls of water** which serve as moats. Ants will not cross water. This is why many hummingbird feeders come with built in ant moats. You can smear **petroleum jelly** on the cage legs, but if your bird has access to the cage legs and climbs up and down them, you'll have quite the mess on your hands. You can put **double stick tape** on the bottom of the legs, though you'll have to contend with live ants stuck to the tape. You can spray **cooking oil** on the base of the legs so it is too slippery for the ants to climb up. You can put **barrier lines on the floor**



surrounding the cage which ants will not cross. Commonly used relatively safe powders include **borax, cayenne pepper, chalk, and cinnamon**. Borax scratches insect exoskeletons and dehydrates insects to death. If you mix it with something sweet, like sugar, they will eat it and carry it back to the nest, where it will kill the other ants. Ants detest cinnamon. They run away from it, and sprinkling cinnamon on them may kill them outright. Cinnamon seems to be the most oft cited effective ant deterrent. The stories abound about the lengths ants will go to to get away from it. It may be that all strong spices, including cayenne pepper, repel ants. Cayenne pepper can be irritating to bird and human eyes, so use with caution. Ants will not cross a chalk line. These are all okay to use around birds unless your bird takes a liking to the powder and decides to scarf it up. Like most things, you need to know your bird and observe his or her behavior. Sprinkling these powders around the outside of your house will deter ants from coming in, but remember that they will wash away in the rain unless they are mixed with an oil and sprayed or painted on the base of the house exterior. While diatomaceous earth is commonly used to repel ants, it is abrasive and can cause breathing difficulties, so do not use it around birds.



You can also poison ants using commonly available agents, such as Terro Liquid Ant Bait (one example), which is a **borax-based liquid** generally safe to use around animals and children. The ants take the bait back to the nest, killing the other ants and the queen. Since birds could take a liking to it (it's a sweet food-based product) and ingest large quantities, however, it should only be placed in locations inaccessible to your birds, such as under the sink in a cabinet. You can also make your own ant bait with borax and various sweeteners, such as honey, corn syrup, or sugar.

Ken Highfull describes an easy, inexpensive method to do this. Make sure that containers are safely away from large birds who might bite through them.

<http://www.birdsnways.com/wisdom/ww36eii.htm>

Ants will eat **corn meal** and carry it back to the nest, where it will kill other ants because it cannot be digested properly. Corn meal is effective and safe to use around birds. Just sprinkle it anywhere you see ants.

Remember that what works for one person may not necessarily work for another, so you might have to try more than one method to rid your house of ants. Bottom line - keep the ants from getting into your house in the first place!

This helpful column from "Green and Healthy" gives more information about **eco-friendly ways to get rid of ants**.

<http://www.greenandhealthy.info/antcontrol.html>

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