

Flying ant day" in Britain is all about sex. Certain ants develop wings to help them spread out from their native colony so they can mate with unrelated males, Professor Hart said, noting that the insects want to avoid inbreeding. Let that sink in. For about six weeks at the height of summer in Britain, typically between mid-July through the early days of September, winged ants emerge from their colonies and ascend to the air to find a mate. The mating action has gained notoriety partly because the insects become nuisances to anyone outdoors at the wrong time. "There's often a day where it seems when you look on social media and across the newspapers, that ants have flown and it becomes this 'flying ant day,'" said Adam Hart, a professor of science communication at the University of Gloucestershire, more than 100 miles northwest of London. At a certain time of the year, however, ants will begin producing larvae, which will develop into potential new queens and males with wings. "It's a good way of getting some genetic diversity in their offspring and making sure they don't compete with their mother colony," he said, adding that the entire event lasts just a couple of hours. Although ants are often labeled nuisances to humans, they are hard-working insects that condition the soil by burrowing. Swarms of flying ants can sometimes be so dense they are detected on rain radar, said a spokeswoman for the Met Office, Britain's national weather service. Picture it: millions of tiny little winged ants soaring into the sky in a ritualistic orgy under the hot sun. Temperatures must be above 77 degrees Fahrenheit, or 25 degrees Celsius, Professor Hart said, and the winds must be relatively low, with no rain. Tilly Collins, a senior fellow at the Center for Environmental Policy at Imperial College London, said that the purpose of all the ant sex was to find partners with whom they could create new colonies. The flying ants are essentially the reproductive members of the colonies. When the time is right, the winged ants will all leave at once and mate, hopefully with ants from other colonies and not their siblings (more on that later). Flying ants themselves are useful outside of reproducing; they are sources of nutrition for birds during the summer. While flying ants will typically emerge between mid-July and early September in England, the weather conditions have to be just right. Everywhere