

ONE BUTTERFLY'S POISON IS ANOTHER'S FEAST: ITHOMIINES ON DROPPINGS (LEPIDOPTERA: NYMPHALIDAE)

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Ithomiine butterflies feeding on antbird droppings at the Fazenda Rancho Grande area, near Cacauplandia, Rondônia, Brazil, 2 Jan 1991. (© 1995 Gary N. Ross)

Within the American tropical rainforests, birds of the family Formicoriidae (Passeriformes) are commonly called antbirds because of their peculiar habit of following colonies of army ants. The birds feed not only on the ants but on the myriad of small creatures stirred up by the marauding ants. As interesting as this phenomenon is, there is an even greater story: certain butterflies (principally female ithomiines and hesperiids) also follow the ants in order to feed on the droppings (excrement) of the antbirds.

Supposedly, the highly nitrogenous feces supply the butterflies with amino acids, minerals, and salts needed in their metabolism (especially for longevity and also for egg production). Some of these butterflies have evolved a possibly unique strategy for avoiding being captured by the ants: the butterflies have long, loosely fitting scales on their bodies and legs, which can be easily discarded during any ant attack.