

## First Report of the Ghost Ant, *Tapinoma melanocephalum* (Hymenoptera: Formicidae), from Alabama

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### INTRODUCTION

The Ghost ant, *Tapinoma melanocephalum* (Fabricius) (Hymenoptera: Formicidae), is an exotic tramp species thought to be native to tropical regions of Africa or Asia (Smith 1965). As a result of global commerce, this species is widespread in subtropical and tropical regions around the world as well as having indoor populations in greenhouses and other buildings in temperate regions (Nickerson and Bloomcamp 2006, Wetterer 2009).

Ghost ants typically form polygynous unicolonies, which may be quite large. These opportunistic colonizers nest both indoors in wall voids, potted plants, or similar areas and in disturbed outdoor areas in plant stems, dried grass clumps, debris, dead tree limbs, in plant pots, under objects on the ground, under bark, at bases of palm fronds, or other microhabitats (Harris 2005, Nickerson and Bloomcamp 2006). Ghost ants do not sting or bite, but are considered a nuisance pests in homes and businesses because they invade food stores, especially sugary foods (Smith 1965).

Workers of *Tapinoma* species can be recognized by the following characteristics: Mandibles with 3-7 teeth and usually about seven denticles, antennae 12-segmented, large erect hairs generally absent on the body, propodeal spines absent, petiole lacking a protruding node, petiole often overhung by the gaster, only four gastral tergites apparent, and tip of the gaster with a slit-like opening (not circular or modified into a sting). Workers of *Tapinoma melanocephalum* (Figure 1) can be easily distinguished from other species in the southeastern United States by their minute size (1.3–

1.5 mm in total length) and distinctive bicoloration (head and mesosoma dark brown to blackish brown and appendages, petiole, and gaster milky white). The native *Tapinoma sessile* (Say) (odorous house ant) is easily separated from *T. melanocephalum* by its much larger size (2.4–3.25 mm in total length) and dark brown coloration.

Here, I report the first record of *T. melanocephalum* from Alabama. I collected workers of *T. melanocephalum* on 16 May 2017 as they foraged along a sidewalk near a large southern live oak tree (*Quercus virginiana*) in a cul-de-sac in downtown Mobile, Alabama (30°41'39"N 88°02'43"W). Pinned specimens were deposited in the Mississippi Entomological Museum.

In addition *T. melanocephalum*, I collected several other exotic species of ants at the site including *Brachymyrmex patagonicus* Mayr, *Cyphomyrmex rimosus* (Spinola), *Odontomachus haematodus* (Linnaeus), *Paratrechina longicornis* (Latreille), *Pheidole navigans* Forel, *P. obscurithorax* Naves, *Pseudomyrmex gracilis* (Fabricius), and *Solenopsis invicta* Buren. All of these species are now well established in Baldwin and Mobile Counties in Alabama and in the nearby coastal counties of Mississippi (Jackson, Harrison, and Hancock Counties). I collected only two native species at the site: *Camponotus decipiens* Emery and *Crematogaster ashmeadi* Mayr.

In the United States, the ghost ant is a serious nuisance pest species in Hawaii (Nickerson and Bloomcamp 2006) and Florida (Klotz et al. 1995). It was first found in Texas in the mid 1990's after being accidentally introduced with plants shipped from Florida (Cook et al. 1994, Wetterer 2009). MacGown

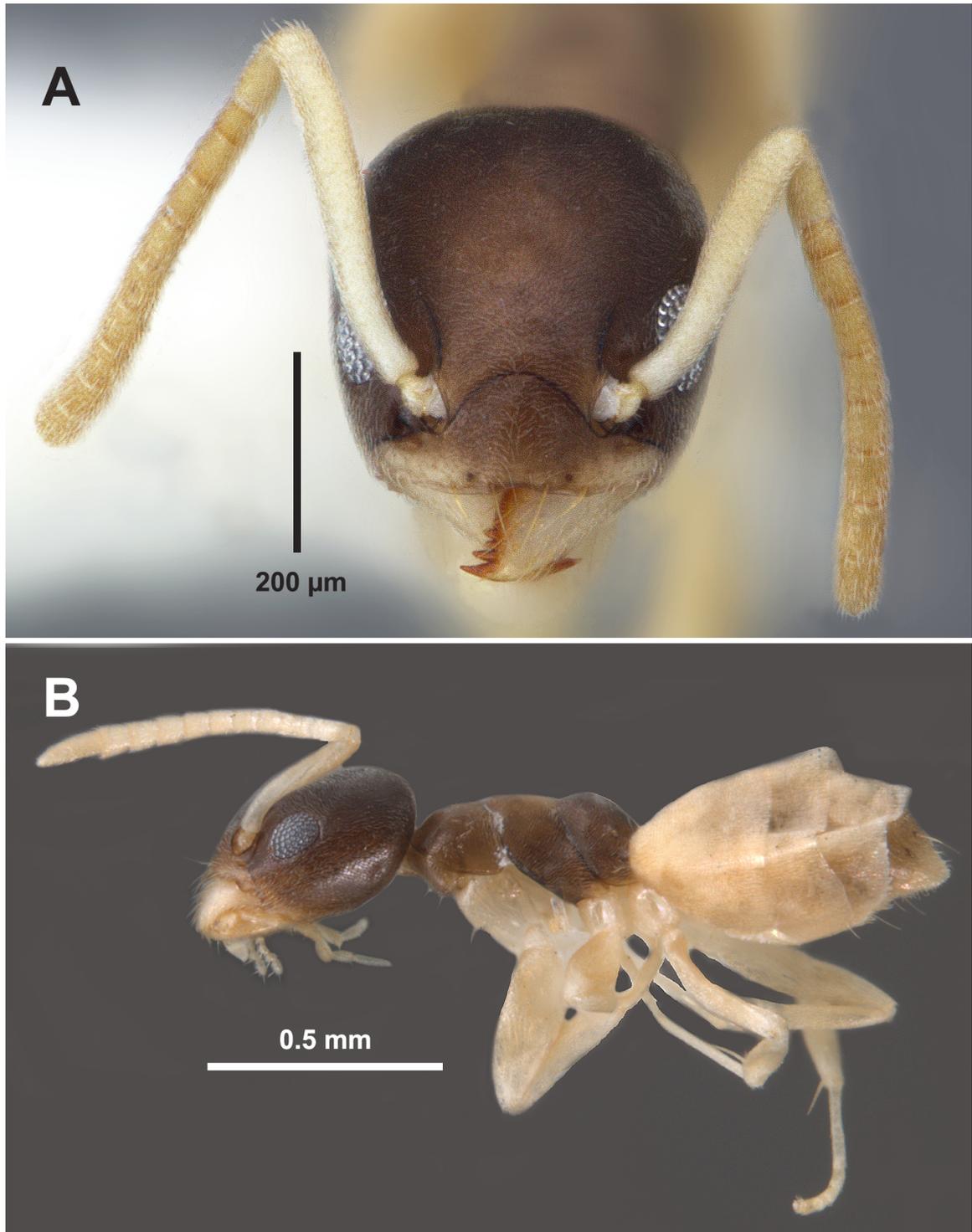
and Hill (2009) reported *T. melanocephalum* from coastal Mississippi in 2009. Their collections were made at an outdoor palm nursery, and similar to the Texas introduction, MacGown and Hill (2009) suspected the ants were introduced with plants shipped from Florida. During visits to the Mississippi Gulf Coast in subsequent years, I have observed that this species was well established in other localities in the state. This species has also been reported from isolated localities in numerous northern states in the United States and even in Ontario, and Quebec, Canada, but these records are based on indoor populations (Nickerson and Bloomcamp 2006, Wetterer 2009).

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**Figure 1.** *Tapinoma melanocephalum* worker, (A) full face view, and (B) lateral view.