

1 **A TODDLER'S CURIOSITY** can be infectious. Walking to a park in their London neighborhood a few years ago, Eduard Florin Niga and his young daughter met an ant on the pavement. The girl stopped to examine it.

2 "Where are the ant's eyes, Dad?" she asked. Her father, a teacher—and a former police officer in his native Romania, where he documented crime scenes—knew photography would provide the answer.

3 Ants are one of Earth's most abundant and successful animals. Fossils indicate they arose between 168 million and 140 million years ago. Today more than 15,000 species may exist. Some 12,000 of them have

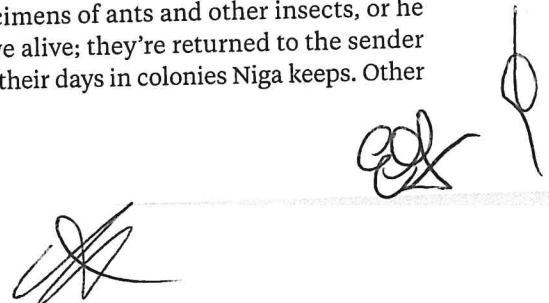
4 been described, and dozens have portraits in Niga's debut book, *Ants: Workers of the World*.

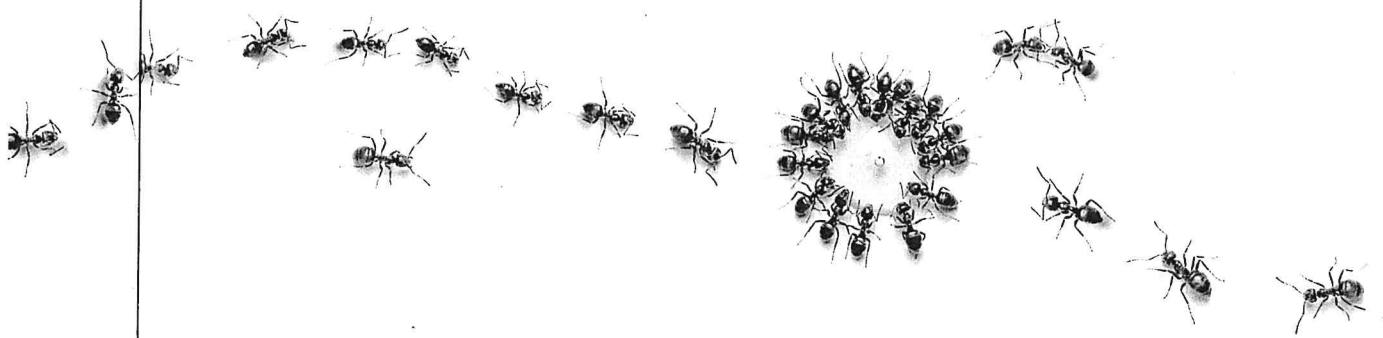
5 Niga's mode of macrophotography is painstaking, whether he's magnifying a thing to 10 times its size or a thousand. He works alone at night in the back of his house, where vibrations from passing vehicles won't disturb his setup. The room's only illumination is the light he trains on his subjects.

6 Collaborators send Niga specimens of ants and other insects, or he orders them online. Some arrive alive; they're returned to the sender after the photo shoot or live out their days in colonies Niga keeps. Other

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specimens arrive preserved, often in ethanol. To ready a dead specimen for its close-up, Niga carefully rehydrates it, cleans it, pries open its jaws, and pins it in a lifelike position. ("It's a little world," he says, "so every little thing matters.") He then takes hundreds of magnified images of the insect's parts. To make the final portrait, Niga combines 150 to 500 of the images using a process called focus stacking, in which similar images with different focal points are blended to achieve a more profound depth of field. Completing one of these portraits can require a week or longer.

Combining images doesn't work with live models—movement can make an ant look, for example, as if it has several heads—so capturing a satisfactory photo of a live insect can take Niga a couple of days. He says he isn't a patient person in most situations, "but with this, I don't know where the patience comes from. It's probably because I absolutely love it." Niga hopes his images foster a greater appreciation of the world's tiny creatures—eyes and all. □

A freelance writer and researcher, **Hicks Wogan** recently wrote for *National Geographic* about a New Zealand government plan to tax farmers for their herds' greenhouse gas emissions.

The ants go marching:
Above, some black garden ants (*Lasius niger*) proceed in a line as others pause to sip from a drop of sugar water the photographer left for them.

