



Zootaxa 2843: 1–118 (2011)
www.mapress.com/zootaxa/

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Monograph

ISSN 1175-5326 (print edition)

ZOOTAXA

ISSN 1175-5334 (online edition)

ZOOTAXA

2843

Taxonomy of Afrotropical and West Palaearctic ants of the ponerine genus *Hypoponera* Santschi (Hymenoptera: Formicidae)

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Magnolia Press
Auckland, New Zealand

Accepted by J. Longino: 21 Jan. 2011; published: 29 Apr. 2011

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(*Zootaxa* 2843)

118 pp.; 30 cm.

29 Apr. 2011

ISBN 978-1-86977-689-3 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-86977-690-9 (Online edition)

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2011 BY

Magnolia Press

P.O. Box 41-383

Auckland 1346

New Zealand

e-mail: zootaxa@mapress.com

<http://www.mapress.com/zootaxa/>

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ISSN 1175-5326 (Print edition)

ISSN 1175-5334 (Online edition)

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Abstract

The taxonomy of the ponerine ants of the genus *Hypoponera* is revised for the Afrotropical and West Palaearctic regions. A combined key to both faunas is presented, and the West Palaearctic species are also keyed separately. Fifty-six species are recognised in total, of which 51 are Afrotropical endemics and two are restricted to the West Palaearctic; three tramp species occur in both regions. Thirty-four Afrotropical species are described as new while 33 names, including a number of infraspecific taxa and extralimital forms, are relegated to synonymy. Two previously described Afrotropical *Hypoponera* names are regarded as *species inquirendae* (*lea*, *petiolata*). Two extralimital species are mentioned with respect to the studied fauna: *gibbinota*, described from a casual introduction in a Palaearctic hothouse, and the Oriental *assmuthi*, which is provisionally raised to species to dissociate it from the Palaearctic *abeillei*, to which it was previously linked as an infraspecific taxon.

Key words: Ponerinae, *Hypoponera*, Afrotropical, West Palaearctic, taxonomy

Introduction

Among the Afrotropical ants *Hypoponera* represents the epitome of morphological monotony and taxonomic confusion, and it is one of the genera that has actively initiated avoidance behaviour among taxonomists. To cite a significant instance of this, there is no mention at all of *Ponera* (as it was then) in the taxonomic section of Wheeler's (1922) huge volume on ants collected in the territory that was then called the Belgian Congo, despite the fact that numerous specimens must have been collected. This omission must reflect a deliberate decision by Wheeler to ignore the genus. We can be fairly sure of this because in a survey of leaf litter ants conducted by Belshaw & Bolton (1994) in Ghana the number of *Hypoponera* specimens retrieved was high. The total number of individuals referable to the tribe Ponerini (*sensu* Bolton, 2003) in that survey was 3554, which was about 8% of the total number of ants sampled. Of these, 2410 (about 68% of Ponerini) were *Hypoponera*, which in terms of the total number of ants found in the survey represents a very significant 5.5%. Further, a single species of *Hypoponera*, *H. dulcis*, on its own represented 4.2% of all the ants collected in the survey, a remarkable 51% of all the Ponerini. In other words, *Hypoponera* specimens are very common in West Africa, as indeed they are in other tropical regions (Ward, 2000). In addition to these figures from Ghana, many samples of the most common species of the region, in particular *dulcis* and *coeca*, have been collected by hand or Winkler bag from all across the forest zone of West and Central Africa, so Wheeler's omission of *Hypoponera* was probably deliberate. The main reason for his decision