



# Ants carrying lavender flowers

at Copan Ruinas, Honduras

Leaf Cutting Ants mentioned in the Popol Vuh



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## Leaf-cutting ants mentioned in the Popol Vuh

The Guatemalan Maya myth of the Popol Vuh clearly mentions leaf-cutting ants harvesting and carrying flowers of several colors. Since one of our goals is to find, photograph, and learn about all plants and animals mentioned in Maya myths, over the last several years we have been on the lookout for leaf-cutting ants harvesting flowers.

So far we have found and photographed leaf-cutting ants with flowers throughout the year. There seems to be no particular month, no particular season: there are different species of flower blooming each and every month throughout Guatemala.

- Biological research station Las Guacamayas, late December (circa 2009 or 2010)
- An hour upriver from Sayaxche, Hotel Ecologico Posada Caribe
- Parque Nacional Tikal, aguada, carrying flowers of zompopos
- Parque Nacional Tikal, zompopos with lavender flower (Aug. 14).
- Izabal, before hike to Tortugal Marina Hotel, entire white flowers (tiny tiny flowers, so easy for an ant to carry one complete flower)
- Izabal, a village 15 minutes from Rio Dulce, maize field, late December 2011, carrying yellow flowers
- Suchitepequez, while visiting a cacao conference we noticed zompopos carrying yellow flowers through the middle of the exposition tent area! Dec. 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- Las Sepulturas, Copan, carrying lavender (and a few yellow) flowers, mid-April
- Las Sepulturas, Copan, carrying red flowers flowers, mid-April 2012.
- In a small village between Cajabon and Senaju, Alta Verapaz (white flowers with a yellow center).

## Here are samples from Sofia Monzon's photography at Copan

We noticed these ants while we were parking the car. Since I needed to see what other flowering plants were blooming deeper into the ruins, we left Sofia Monzon to photograph the zompopos while we went to photograph a gorgeous blooming tree. Later I found leaf-cutting ants harvesting and carrying red flowers. So on a single day in one area we found two different groups of ants, each working with a totally different flower.





## Leaf-cutting ants and cacao flowers

I go to a lot of cacao orchards (and I raise cacao myself, so I can become familiar with the growing habits and especially with the flowers). But I have never seen zompopos carrying cacao flowers. But there is at least one article discussing this.

### LEWIS, T.

1975 Colony size, density and distribution of the leaf-cutting ant, *Acromyrmex octospinosus* (Reich) in cultivated fields. Transactions of the Royal Entomological Society of London. Volume 127, Issue 1, pages 51–64, May 1975.

In newly planted cacao an estimated 6—17% of plants were defoliated and destroyed. In established cacao ants collected about 3000 flowers/ha each day. Laboratory data suggest that ants could defoliate about 25 three-year old citrus trees in a year.

## Zompopos carry more than leaves and flowers

It is also worth looking at Mayan feelings about the zompopos carrying maize. This is an entire additional chapter that we have not yet started with. But we are aware that zompopos carry obviously more than leaves. So the next goal is to learn, what do they cart away besides flowers?

Maize from grannery?

Maize from maize field?

Feathers from sleeping birds? (clearly mentioned in the Popol Vuh)

It has taken four or five years to document the harvesting of flowers by these ants. To find leaf-cutting ants collecting maize kernels will be pure luck: being at the right place at the right time.

Finding zompopos cutting the leaves of maize should be easier.

To find leaf-cutting ants harvesting bits of feathers from sleeping birds, that would deserve the equivalent of a Noble Biology Prize (mostly for sheer good luck, and partially for having found out that the ants really do harvest feathers; in real life; not just in the Popol Vuh).





## Zompopos in Las Sepulturas, Copan Ruinas

After parking our vehicle in front of the guard house at Las Sepulturas (Copan), I noticed zompopo ants carrying lavender flowers across the parking area. So I asked Sofia Monzon to photograph these while the rest of us went in search of flowering trees deeper into the park. Ironically we eventually found another nest of zompopos half a kilometer away who were harvesting red flowers. So on a single day we found two nests of leaf-cutting ants carrying flowers.

## Glossary

You can find leaf-cutter spelled that way, or as one word, leafcutter.





















## Brief “Book Review”

**GILLESPIE, S. and A. L. MacVEAN**

2002 Las flores del Popol Vuh. Revista de la Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. 12:10-17.

The authors are correct to cast doubt on “chipilin” as being the flowers that the ants were carrying in the Popol Vuh. The authors then try to identify which species of flowers are the ones cut by ants in the Popol Vuh. I would suggest re-researching this topic now that we have visual (photographic) evidence of zompopos in diverse eco-systems carrying flowers.

### Bibliography of selected web sites

[www.blueboard.com/leafcutters/images.htm](http://www.blueboard.com/leafcutters/images.htm)

[http://toftphoto.photoshelter.com/image/I0000\\_Wfc5krK0BI](http://toftphoto.photoshelter.com/image/I0000_Wfc5krK0BI)

[www.projectnoah.org/spottings/9055306](http://www.projectnoah.org/spottings/9055306)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NeN7PJzT6Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NeN7PJzT6Y)



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