Honey Bee FAQ

What do you think of when you think of honey bees? Their honey? Their important role in pollinating crops? Their honeycomb hives? The possibility they'll sting you?

Powerful pollinators! Honey bees are not native to North America, but were brought over by early settlers and are now used extensively as pollinators for many crops. Honey bees are generalist feeders – they gather nectar and pollen from a wide variety of flowers – making them excellent pollinators. Adult honey bees drink nectar from flowers to feed themselves, and as they travel from flower to flower, they pack their "pollen baskets" with a mixture of nectar and pollen to bring back to their hives to feed their larval sisters. As they travel from flower to flower, they accidentally transfer pollen between flowers. When visiting flowers of the same species, this transfer of pollen fertilizes the female parts of flowers, allowing the flowers to create seeds and fruits. Honey bees' role in pollination helps support a huge portion of our food supply.

How and why do bees make honey? There are close to 1,000 identified species of bees in Colorado, but only honey bees make substantial amounts of honey (bumble bees also make a little bit). To make honey, honey bees lap up flower nectar, return to their hive, spit the nectar into an empty honeycomb cell, and then dehydrate the nectar with their tongues and wings, turning it into honey. They create honey to use as a food source through the winter, since adult honey bees remain active in the hive all winter.

How and why do bees make hives? Very few species of bees make hives - most live in the ground, twigs, or dead wood. And, most bee species actually live solitary lives, with a single mother creating and provisioning pollen and nectar for her babies! The highly social honey bees make honeycomb hives – female workers secrete wax from in between their abdominal segments, building up beeswax into cells where the queen lays eggs and workers create honey.

Scared of a honey bee stinging you? Female honey bees (including all worker bees) can sting – as they sting, their barbed stingers are left behind in your skin, tearing off the end of their abdomen, killing the honey bees. Male honey bees do not have stingers because stingers are derived from the egg-laying apparatus, which males do not have. Honey bees will typically only sting if they feel their hive is threatened. If a honey bee seems interested in you, try slowly backing away.

Honey bees are just one type of bee. Honey bees are incredible creatures with unique characteristics, and they provide amazing pollination services to our food systems. While we should appreciate them, we should also remember that they are an introduced species from Europe and that there are over 20,000 other species of bees that also play crucial roles in the well-being of our ecosystems worldwide. Plant diverse wildflowers that bloom throughout the summer and take time to notice the bees!

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