

Nature Diary 5

Have you written your Christmas list yet? If not don't forget to ask Santa for a bug hotel. I got one last year and it now has 10 residents. Actually each sealed tube is the nursery for a solitary wasp baby.



A solitary wasp is not a wasp without any friends. There are at least 7,000 British species. They do not look like the striped critters that spoil your picnic. Some are minute and many are parasitic.



The female wasp catches its prey, usually caterpillars and spiders, and puts them in the tube then injects them with an anaesthetic. She lays her egg on or inside the victim. The larvae hatches and eats the prey from the inside leaving the vital organs till last. This gives it a good supply of fresh meat. When fully developed an adult wasp breaks out and flies away. This is a common life style for these wasps although some use holes in the ground. One species, after sealing the entrance picks up a small stone and uses it to firm it down. This is a rare example of an insect using a tool.

My favourite wasp is the Emerald Cockroach Wasp (*Ampulex compressa*) which feeds its young on cockroaches which are much larger than it. It lands on the victim and precisely injects into the brain in two places which disables the cockroaches' freewill. The wasp grabs hold of the antennae and leads it like a dog on a lead down its burrow where it lays its eggs on the poor helpless thing leaving it to be eaten alive.

What is the difference between a fly and a wasp? Flies have two wings and wasps have four. Next time you see a fly walking up the kitchen window don't squish it. Look it in its compound eyes and say "you little miracle of micro engineering"

Most insects do not have all their sensory organs on their heads. How does a fly walk up glass? House flies have remarkable feet with sticky corduroy soles. They only move three legs at a time except



when they are on the ceiling when they hold on with four and move two. When it lands on your egg mayo sandwich it tastes with its feet. If it finds it yummy it squirts saliva from its squeegee mop tongue and a pump in its head sucks up the smoothie. Another pump squirts it into its stomach. Obviously its feet are not clean after exploring a nearby juicy cowpat and its saliva carries all sorts of nasty bacteria.

Some insects have sensory organs in surprising places. Mosquitoes smell hear and touch with their

antennae. Some moths have ears in their mouths. When I was growing up in bomb bashed London with no wild areas to explore young boys knew that grasshoppers had ears in their knees. One species of swallowtail butterfly takes first prize. The male has eyes on its penis. This is to make sure he is doing 'it' properly. It gives a new interpretation of the nursery rhyme Wee Willie Winkie. The female also has eyes on her genitalia so she can see she has laid her eggs properly.



Swallowtail Papilio machaon, River Bure, Norfolk © Adrian Hoskins

Now that winter is approaching I hope you are keeping your bird feeders and bird baths topped up. We've just totted up all of the different birds we've seen in our garden over the years. There are 31 different species we can remember. Apart from the usual culprits we have had some surprising visitors. One morning we found two mallard ducks in our tiny pond. They stayed with us for a few days. At that time we had a very high hedge so they had to use VETOL (vertical take-off and landing). We had two red legged partridges chasing up and down the path and sitting on the roof making a lot of noise. We also had a green parrot which seemed to like our rockery. I'll let you know if we see a dodo.



Tim W.

15/11/20