

The Buzzing of Carpenter Bees

As a kid, I spent much of my time outdoors playing and exploring. That decision was influenced mainly by my mom. She would run me and my sister out of the house on a pretty spring or summer day so she could get her housework done. Plus, in the early eighties, our family TV had less than 10 channels on a clear day. I also did not have video games or the latest and greatest tech gadget for entertainment. So, much of my childhood days consisted of being outdoors and learning about nature.

My fondest childhood memories were the beginnings of spring. I knew spring was here when all the pink creeping phlox growing along the hill going down to our basement was blooming. There I would see carpenter bees and swallowtail butterflies going from flower to flower. I was easily entertained for hours – watching and chasing them and catching them in nets and quart jars. Now as an adult, nothing has really changed. I still have this kidlike awe and fascination of insects. I still chase and catch bugs except now I typically have a camera with me too.

A sure sign that spring is officially here is when we see carpenter bees buzzing around. Carpenter bees, which get mistaken for bumble bees, are best known for hanging around houses, porches, barns and other wooden structure every spring and summer. Bumblebees have a hairy abdomen with black and yellow stripes where as carpenter

bees do not have yellow hair on their abdomen. Carpenter bees tunnel and nest in wood thus their name where as bumblebees nest in cavities in ground.

After a long winter, adult carpenter bees come out in the spring to forage and mate. They can be seen buzzing around flowering plants collecting pollen. Carpenter bees are very good pollinators but can be a nuisance and cause damage if they decide to excavate holes in wood to rear young.

One thing I learned as a kid is that carpenter bees are not aggressive and are basically harmless. Male carpenter bees, which have a pale yellow “nose’ between their eyes, do not have the ability to sting. (Note - all boy bees, wasp, ants, etc. cannot sting). Males are commonly seen most often hanging around flowers and near wooden structures looking for and chasing females. Male carpenter bees are also very territorial and are commonly found hovering in an area looking for females and chasing away other males. They act aggressive but only put on a show. So kids, catching and holding them is ok.

Female carpenter bees, which have solid black heads, can most definitely sting, but rarely do unless forced to or handled. They are usually the ones doing the damage to wood and can be found going in and out of the holes they bored. They also spend a lot of their time feeding on and pollinating flowers. Female carpenter bees bore into wood, excavating a tunnel to lay their eggs. The presence of sawdust typically indicates activity. Inside the tunnel, about five or six cells are constructed for housing individual eggs. Collected pollen spring flowering plants is stored with a single egg in each cell for

food for the developing larva. Later in the summer, new adult bees will emerge and forage on flowers. These bees will return to the wooden homes in the fall for hibernation until next spring.

Despite being beneficial insects, carpenter bees get a bad reputation due to the damage they cause to wood. A clear sign of a carpenter bee infestation is the appearance of circular gallery holes (about the size of a penny) in exposed wood. Carpenter bees excavate galleries in many species of dried, seasoned wood but seem to prefer softwoods such as pine, fir, redwood and cedar. They may cause cosmetic damage to porch and shed rafters, railings, overhead trim and eaves, wooden porch furniture, dead trees, fence posts, wooden siding, and even wooden park benches. They prefer unpainted or well-weathered wood over painted or hardwood timbers. Carpenter bee infestations may persist for several years as each new generation emerges and the process natural continues.

To prevent carpenter bees from causing damage, keep all wood products treated with paint or varnish. Treating the holes with an insecticide in the evening when the bees are at rest will also help. Liquid, aerosol or dust insecticides containing ingredients such as carbaryl, boric acid, bifenthrin, cyfluthrin, deltamethrin or lambda cyhalothrin can be applied directly into tunnel openings. Allow the bees to come and go a day or so. Then fill and seal all new and old holes with wood putty, a length of dowel, or cork. Swatting pesky bees trying to make a new hole or enter a hole with a fly swatter or tennis racket. This can be fun as well as an effective control method.

Trapping is another option for effective control. In the last few years, commercial and homemade traps are showing promise for temporarily reducing carpenter bee populations and damage. The theory is that carpenter bees often mistake penny-sized circular holes as the entry holes to nest galleries. Wooden boxes are constructed with a penny size hole that allows the bees to enter but not escape. Bees fall into a narrow-neck clear container that is connected to the bottom of the box. When bees go into the container, it is hard, if not impossible, to get out since they sense to seek light rather than problem solve their way back up and out. A little liquid dishwashing detergent placed in the container will kill the entrapped bees.

Unfortunately, there are not any known products or insecticides that can be applied to protect cedar siding or other types of wood on houses from carpenter bees. Protective contact insecticides applied directly to wood does very little good. No research data can be found to show that wood preservatives will work to control carpenter bees. In fact, it is likely less reliable than painting or using pressure treated wood.

Carpenter bee damage to wooden structure can be magnified by woodpeckers. There are instances when woodpeckers will peck sides of houses to access and expose the carpenter bee holes and galleries to feed on the larva. Unfortunately, there are no control or eradication options for woodpecker damage as all woodpeckers are protected under Alabama law.

Get outdoors and enjoy the spring season but beware of all that buzzing!

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