

SOCIAL WASPS

Social wasps are generally considered undesirable insects by us humans. They buzz around us at summer barbeques, they annoy us by coming into our homes, and often, we hear of people being stung by wasps. To make matters worse, wasp stings are venomous and contain a pheromone, acting as an alarm to other wasps nearby, encouraging them to join in. Our own irritations set apart, social wasps are among some of the most attractive and interesting members of the invertebrate world.

The natural history for social wasps is much the same for all species. A queen wasp emerges from hibernation in spring, to begin construction of her nest. She forms a few hexagonal cells and lays eggs in them. As the eggs hatch into larvae, she tends them lovingly. The larvae eventually hatch as sterile female workers, taking on the responsibilities of nest care, while the queen remains solely devoted to egg-laying. The workers explore the environment, searching for nest-building material or insect prey to bring back to the nest to feed the larvae. Their reward is a sweet secretion produced by the larvae. Additional nourishment needs are met with high-energy foods like sweet fruits and nectar. They are therefore important pollinators.



As its name suggests, the common wasp, *vespula vulgaris* is the most frequently encountered species. Large colonies of common wasps nest in holes in the ground or

in wall cavities, hollow trees, sheds and attics, but never out in the open. Nests are constructed with chewed wood fibres, mixed with their own saliva. They tend to prefer stripping wood at the early stages of decay rather than from sound or rotting timber. Males appear in late summer with the sole purpose to mate with emerging new queens.



The European hornet is the largest member of the social wasp family. It appears as an awesome insect in flight, partly due to its size and also the loud, deep buzz of its wingbeats. This is the most harmless of the social wasps, the bumblebee of the wasp world. It is also the gardeners' friend, both as a pollinator and predator of garden pests such as aphids and caterpillars. Sadly, this insect is in decline, due to habitat loss, widespread pesticide use and unnecessary persecution by humans.

Social wasp nests are annual and colonies decline rapidly in autumn. By winter, all males and workers will have perished and only the new queens are able to survive the colder months in hibernation. The following spring, these new fertile queens emerge to search for nest sites and to begin the process all over again.

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