

Carpenter Bees

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It doesn't matter if you call them carpenter bees, wood bees or whatever, if you have structures, including decks, around your property that have unpainted and untreated wood, you will have these bumblebee look alikes hanging around your property at least part of the summer. Even though they can act scary, and they do look a lot like bumblebees, and they can damage wooden structures, they aren't quite as fearsome as you may think.

Carpenter bees are solitary bees, not colonial bees like bumblebees, honeybees, etc. One queen does all the work. She excavates a hole in wood and then builds brood chambers off the main entrance tunnel. As she develops these brood chambers she packs them with a mixture of pollen and nectar and lays one egg per brood chamber and seals it up. The egg hatches, the larvae has all the food it needs to develop, so it feeds and then pupates into an adult. All of this activity has been happening since May and should be winding down throughout July. The larvae will pupate into adults in August. Some will just stay in their brood chambers or the gallery until next spring but a few will be out and about looking for food.

Carpenter bees look similar to bumblebees and are about the same size but there's a couple of things you need to know. The big defining identification hint is to look at their abdomen, or the back section of the bee. Carpenter bees have a shiny black abdomen that is devoid of hair or fuzz. Bumblebees generally have a yellow very fuzzy looking abdomen. Bumblebees are colonial nesters and will defend their nest with great intensity (trust me I learned that as a kid!) But even in flight, it's fairly easy to tell a carpenter bee from a bumblebee.

The other thing about carpenter bees is that females have a solid black face whereas males have a whitish or golden face. Again, this is very distinctive and visible in flight. Why this is important is because only females sting. Male bees and wasps have no stinger. In fact male bees and wasps are pretty worthless except for one thing, mating with new queens when they emerge. After which most of the time they go off and die. It can be a rather drastic end for some species!

Wherever there are carpenter bees you will invariably see a lot of them flying around, hovering, chasing each other and even buzzing you if you get too close. These are all males who try to guard territory around nesting locations so in case a new queen emerges they can mate with her. These are all males with no stinger and nothing better to do. You can grab them out of the air and they won't sting you because they don't have a stinger. All of their antics truly are just bluff. The females, that do have stingers, are too busy packing food into brood chambers to waste time chasing you. Ignore the braggadocios bees, they're all bark, or buzz rather, and no bite!

The easiest way to reduce nesting activity is to simply maintain a good coat of paint on all the wood. If you have existing nesting activity you can first spray wasp and hornet killer into the nest holes, wait a week or two and then fill them with wood putty. If you don't want to paint the wood you should at least apply some kind of sealer on the wood. It may take a couple of coats if it is older well weathered wood. You could also try spraying up into the nesting holes and on wood in the area with permethrin. Ultimately carpenter bees aren't a threat to you and me, but they can cause issues over time with decks and unpainted wooden structures.