



THE PUBLIC LIFE

of bees

By Jim Mize

Scandalous books about the private lives of bees have dominated the bestseller lists of late. Since I never read them, I can hardly dispute or verify what is rumored to go on amongst bees in private. I will tell you, however, that the public lives of bees are steamy enough.

Female Dominance

Bee society, unsurprisingly, is dominated by women. They run the beehive and do all the work. At least half the readers of Carolina Country magazine are unsurprised by this.

The head female bee, known appropriately as the queen, is the largest bee in the hive, though all the male bees know better than to point this out. None of the males ever graduate to king, likely due to a lack of ambition.

The queen also rules the roost with an iron wing. The workers, which are infertile females, build the hive, search for nectar, feed the young, and vacuum. Well, maybe not vacuum, but literally everything else. The male bees, known as drones, just mate with the queen and die. Males lack the ability to sting; they buzz a lot, and are completely harmless, although their incessant buzzing probably indicates they talk a good game with their buddies.

To prove just how useless male bees are, if food becomes scarce in the fall, the

females kick them out and let them starve, unless the queen is around to stick up for them. Coincidentally, this occurs about the same time as football season.

The queen bee's control of the hive comes not surprisingly from the use of hormones. One hormone is used to attract drones and another is used to keep other females infertile. With all these hormones and females in one hive, it makes sense that the males would be completely harmless, lack a sting, and get thrown out of the hive to starve.

Doing the Bee Boogie

Since the hives are composed mostly of women, it should also come as no surprise that they like to dance. In fact, Karl von Frisch won a Nobel Prize in 1973 by figuring out the language of bee dancing. (Stay tuned...this could be the scandalous part). He determined that bees know two dances, neither of which are the Shag.

In the first dance, worker bees dance in a circle indicating the source of nectar they have found. In the second dance, they indicate the distance to the nectar

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by wagging their tails. In hindsight, this tail-wagging dance may have inspired the invention of the Shag.

To aid their studies of bee dancing, scientists invented a robotic bee that could perform these dances. Sometimes, just for kicks, the scientists would get the robotic bee to send all the others in the wrong direction, proving only that scientists are easy to amuse.

The male bees, on the other hand, communicate mostly by sounds. Probably, this is due to their being lousy dancers.

Makin' Honey but Not Biscuits

"Busy as a bee" is a phrase well justified, as the typical worker will visit and pollinate 10,000 flowers in a single day. Literally, they live on fast food.

All this activity targets one activity: making honey. Honey-making is a complex process, at least to me.

From what I can tell, it begins when a bee absorbs nectar into a honey sac, which works something like a stomach. On the trip back to the hive, some of the nectar is eliminated, and you can probably guess how.

The nectar is then enriched by the bee glands and unloaded back at the hive, and once again, I'll let you envision this part of the process. Other bees do something disgusting to process it, and then flap frantically to evaporate more water. This distilling goes on for a while and when the water content drops to 17-20

percent, the revenueers show up. Just kidding, but the honey is "ripe" at that point.

Bees produce honey with the hope of getting to eat it all winter. This is especially true of the drones, who run the risk of getting the boot.

The typical bee colony consists of 50,000-60,000 workers and who knows how many slackers. They produce on average 50 pounds of honey and no biscuits.

Another reason they need all this honey is that they do not hibernate. Instead, they pass the winter eating and huddling to keep warm, probably around tiny potbelly stoves.

Steer Clear of Swarms

One of the scariest sights you will ever see, excluding having one of your buddies back your trailer down a boat ramp, is a swarm of honeybees. The sight of 30,000 bees flying in a tight cloud is enough to cause kids to give up late-night horror films.

Typically, a swarm will settle on a tree limb or bush. They may stay here until an appropriate nest or cavity can be found. This is one good reason to always close your mailbox, at least if you want the mailman ever to return.

Bees swarm due to overcrowding and other factors. Considering that all the bees that matter are women, it could have been as simple as something one of them said or a dispute over wall colors. On this point, the robotic bee is not talking. But undoubtedly, the male

bees had no idea why the women were mad anyway.

Most swarms occur in the spring or early summer. Experts recommend that if you see a swarm, either call a beekeeper or hive it yourself. So my advice is to call a beekeeper. Even though bees out for a jaunt tend to be in a good mood, remember there are 30,000 of them and they are mostly women.

With all the honey-making and tail-wagging going on, it's no wonder bees lead such scandalous lives. I'd say more, but you never know exactly which wisecrack will get you kicked out of the hive. 🐝

Jim Mize lives in Simpsonville, S.C. He has collected the best of his outdoor humor in an award-winning book titled, "The Winter of Our Discount Tent." Copies are available for \$18.95 plus shipping and handling by calling (800) 768-2500.

