The Gentle Bee

Look again! That small, bluish black fly you are swatting just might be the four winged orchard mason bee. Looking very much like a small horse fly, the gentle mason bee is sometimes unintentionally swatted. The mason bee is easily found in the early spring on flowering shrubs and fruit trees. The orchard mason bee lives a very simple life in contrast to the honeybee. The orchard mason bee is a solitary bee, while the honey bee depends on social organization to raise, feed, protect, and continue its species. In comparison, the orchard mason female spends her short life gathering food, laying eggs, packing mud entirely alone, getting no help from the males, or her sister bees who are busy with their own labors.

The males patrol the nesting sites looking for emerging females to bestow their attention upon. The male life span is even shorter than that of the female. After all females have emerged from their nests and been impregnated, the males die, leaving the females the job of the continuation of the species.

In addition to their marvelous ability to pollinate our fruit and berry crops in the early spring, the orchard mason bee is easy to propagate. Just by providing the required wooden nesting blocks with 5/16 inch diameter holes, drilled 3 to 6 inches deep, and easy access to a mud hole we can help the bees to continue their life cycle. They are much better pollinators than the honeybee and can be propagated in the smallest of yards. Besides, they are fun and fascinating to watch.

These bees do not range great distances from their nests as long as adequate food sources are available. They start emerging from the nest when temperatures reach a consistent 50 degrees Fahrenheit. The timing of their awakening varies from year to year depending upon the weather. The males emerge first and will continue to come out of the nest for 10 to 15 days. After the males have all appeared, the females will start to wake. Once all of the bees have emerged, for the next thirty days or so the work of the female will be to lay the eggs and prepare the nesting area for the next year's bees. After all of the eggs have been laid the activity begins to slow down and soon all of the bees will have completed their life cycle for that year.

The food that sustains the orchard mason bee is of course pollen and nectar from flowers of the trees and plants. If there isn't an abundance of food during their life cycle of 30 days or so, the bees will move on to where they can find food, leaving the nesting place provided for them. A variety of food sources are required for optimum propagation of the bee. In addition to the fruit and berry flowers of early spring, one excellent source is Pieris japonica, the Lily-of-the-valley bush, which provides a food source for several weeks in spring.

If you are interested in starting your own population of orchard mason bees there are a number of excellent resources to help you get started.