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Highlands County Buzzing with Native Bees

While recent news stories report the decline of hives of European Honey Bees, *Apis mellifera*, residents of Highlands County can take some comfort in a rich diversity of local native bees. These bees come in many sizes, from big, rotund bumblebees to quarter-inch, slender, blue bees. Some species are specialists, like the bees found on the edges of red maple swamps in Highlands Hammock State Park, or the species that collect pollen only from flowers in the blueberry family. Other species, such as the shining green bees common in gardens, visit dozens of kinds of flowers just about anywhere, even along roadsides with traffic zooming by a few feet away.

Just how rich is the Highlands heritage of native bees? “Nobody knows exactly,” admits Dr. Mark Deyrup, who studies pollinator insects at Archbold Biological Station. “There is little funding for studies of these important insects in southern Florida. I guess bee counting doesn’t appeal to bean counters. We know there are at least 113 species of bees just at Archbold, so it would make sense for the entire County to have more than 113.” A publication on Archbold bees is available for free: search for “Bees of the Archbold Biological Station” on Google. “This 32-page list of bees and flowers might be a great cure for insomnia,” claims Deyrup, one of the authors. “There aren’t even any pictures. If, however, one wants to see what one of these bees looks like, the name can be looked up on Google Images, and a photo will usually pop up.”

Many of our local bees are worth taking a few minutes to lookup online because they are strikingly handsome creatures. For example, the Northern Rotund-Resin Bee, Common Eastern Bumblebee, and little green bee are especially intriguing. “I think most of us would be a little happier if we spent a bit more time exploring and appreciating the beauty and intricacy of our amazing heritage of local plants and animals, including bees and flowers,” suggests Deyrup. “This might provide some antidote to an excess of stories of human folly and craziness. A good example to us all is Highlands County Sheriff’s Office crime-fighter Tim Lethbridge.” When he is not pursuing miscreants, Tim Lethbridge occasionally comes to Archbold Biological Station to pursue insects with his camera. His photos are scientifically valuable, and have been used in scientific presentations and papers. For most people, however, the value of these images is in their revelation of the exquisite beauty of some of our common tiny wildlife.

Photo 1: Working alone, the female Northern Rotund-Resin Bee, *Anthidiellum notatum*, crafts a nest of plant resin that she fills with nectar and pollen for her young. Photo by Tim Lethbridge.



Photo 2: The Common Eastern Bumblebee, *Bombus impatiens*, lives in colonies, usually underground. Highly adaptable, this species of bumblebee visits more than 50 kinds of flowers locally. Photo by Tim Lethbridge.



Photo 3: This little green bee, unidentified species of *Augochloropsis*, is scooping up pollen from a cactus flower. Before looking for pollen she will have dug a deep vertical tunnel with side chambers for her young, each of which gets a ball of nectar and pollen. Photo by Tim Lethbridge.

