

# Nature Week at Heritage Village - May 3rd

At an early age I abhorred all bugs. To overcome fear and hatred, I was told, you just need to learn more. So I took an insect class and it worked. I fell in love with the amazingly diverse - some beautiful, some ugly - but always surprisingly strange insects.

The Mackinaw Area Historical Society is having their new land surveyed and as I was checking on the process I stopped along Trails End Road. I stepped out of the car and found myself surrounded by a swarm of bees at ankle height. I winced at what I felt was an eminent sting. My childhood fears returned.

I blinked and to my amazement, the bees were gone. What happened? After remaining still for a few moments the bees reappeared and they were mating on the ground. I dropped my insect net over a pair, one flew away and the other suddenly disappeared. Only when it re-emerged a few minutes later did I figure out what was going on. The bee had dropped into a hole in the ground, pulling dirt in after it.

The abundant anthill mounds around my feet were really the mounds of digger bees. These bees are solitary, each female makes her own hole. In this hole she digs a tunnel with side branches, one for each egg she will lay. At the end of each branch she provisions a home for her child, storing a "pot" of pollen and nectar, then placing an egg on top. Over the next year the egg grows into an adult and emerges in the spring.

To facilitate spring mating these bees build their nests in small aggregations, like towns. The males emerge first in the spring, circling lazily over the ground. When a female pokes out the males descend upon her, mating on the ground. The newly fertilized female starts the process again building a new nest chamber. I had stepped into a spring mating. Those males I saw cruising about my ankles cannot sting and the females have only a mild sting. I had nothing to fear.



Thanks to Lori Axtell for working with me to get photos of these insects. She is a remarkable photographer. Her work can be seen at <http://crowtree.zenfolio.com/>

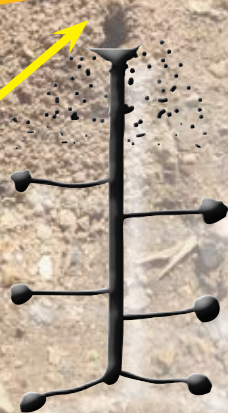


These bees prefer south facing sites with pliable soil and are the earliest bees emerging in April or May. They are buzz pollinators, entering a flower, buzzing loudly enough to set up vibrations that shake the pollen onto their bodies. See if you can find a town.



Bee digging at hole.

Holes



Underground arrangement

The moral of this story: Don't be afraid of what you don't understand.

