

Hover Flies

by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

I remember as a young boy working with my father in the woods on a warm summer day being greatly puzzled by a delicate high-pitched singing sound that I could not locate or identify. Some years later while I was resting on a log by the trail I heard the same singing sound very close to me. Resting on the same log right beside me was the singer, a fly with black and yellow stripes. The song started at about E sharp near the top of the scale and gradually progressing upward until it was beyond my range of hearing. Now I finally knew that this musician was a hover fly, one member of a large family of flies, many of which can hover in a stationary position in the air before darting away.

The family Syrphidae includes hover flies and flower flies many of which sip nectar from flowers and resemble bees, both in appearance and actions. People are often frightened when a hover fly that looks like a bee or a yellowjacket lands on their arm wanting to lick up salty perspiration. It has neither a stinger to sting with nor jaws to bite with and the two wings of a fly, not the four wings of a bee. Most people do not care about such details and brush it away as quickly as possible. Several kinds of hover flies lay their eggs near a colony of aphids and the fly larvae feed voraciously on aphids, often destroying all of the aphids on one plant. These hover flies are just as beneficial to us as ladybeetles.

The larvae of hover flies look like small caterpillars (about 1/2 inch long) usually brown or green. They do not have a distinct head and the front portion of the body can be elongated to reach out and capture an aphid. The adult hover flies are often called flower flies because they feed on pollen and nectar and are commonly seen visiting flowers. They are often pollinating the flowers as they fly from one blossom to the next in search of food.

Watch for hover flies in your garden and learn to distinguish them from yellowjackets and bees. Yellowjackets do not hover at all and bees are a bit clumsy compared to hover flies that can remain motionless in the air. Now that you know they can not sting or bite you, consider them your friends and invited them to help you control aphids in your garden.



The singer! A Hover Fly that sings.



A colorful Hover Fly from Skagit County.