

Ground Bees

by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

The most abundant bees I see in my garden and orchard are little bees that dig holes in the ground for their nests. They are not leafcutter bees and they are not the same as the orchard mason bee. They dig a tunnel in soft soil and form a nest chamber in which they store pollen and nectar for the larva that hatches from the egg laid there. The larva changes into a pupa that overwinters in the ground and emerges as an adult bee the next spring. I have two different species in the genus Lasioglossum nesting in my garden. One is about 1/4 inch in body length and the other is about 3/8 inch long. This genus includes many species in our area, but they are difficult to determine to species so until I get some help on these, I will just call them big Lasioglossum and little Lasioglossum. The name means hairy tongue (lasio=hairy, glossa=tongue) so maybe we can call them the big hairy tongued and the little hairy tongued bee. They dig their burrows in the same area and gather pollen and nectar from the same blossoms. I see them working from early spring until late fall, gathering pollen and nectar from all kinds of blossoms. A large oregano plant in our herb garden blooms profusely all through the late summer and fall and on a warm sunny day, I have seen hundreds of hairy tongued bees feeding on the oregano blossoms. If for some reason you wanted to produce oregano seed, this would be the best bee to help you.

There are many other kinds of ground nesting bees in Skagit county. They are divided into families such as the yellow faced bees (Colletidae. collett=glued together) which use sticky nectar from the blossoms to glue the soil particles together to form the walls of the egg chamber they dig in the loose soil. Bees in the family called Digger Bees (Anthophoridae. antho=flower; phori=feeding on) are larger than either the yellow faced or hairy tongued bees and look more like honeybees except they are dark colored, often black, and fuzzy. The family Halictidae which includes the hairy tongued bees also includes a common bee often referred to as sweat (perspiration) bees because they seem attracted to the sweaty skin of people working in the garden. The females do have a stinger as do the other ground bees, but they are not known to sting people unless you grasp them in your fingers and hurt or restrain them.

We know very little about the role these ground bees have in our ecosystem. They are important as pollinators, and may be an important link in the complex food chain that ties plants and animals together as producers and consumers. The first step in learning more about the ground nesting bees in Skagit County is to collect and identify them. Beyond that we should learn which flowers they are visiting, when they are active and where they are nesting. Your observations could help us better understand and manage our ecosystem.



The Hairy-Tongued Bee
(Lasioglossum)