



Social Bees: *A Queen and Her Troops*

About 20% of the world's more than 20,000 species of bees are social. They live communally in colonies of hundreds to tens of thousands of individuals. Each colony has one queen who is the mother of sterile daughters (the worker bees) and a few males called drones.

The best-known social bee around the world is the honey bee (*Apis mellifera*). Originally native to Europe, honey bees traveled with their human caretakers and now are found worldwide. Another well-known group is the fuzzy and charismatic black-and-yellow bumblebee (*Bombus* spp.). The sacred stingless bees (*Melipona* and *Trigona*) kept by both the ancient and modern Maya also live as highly social colonies, producing a surplus of honey.

Social bees don't specialize on a particular floral color or shape—their forte is finding and exploiting rich sources of nectar and pollen. (In fact, their efficiency and numbers can cause problems for the solitary bees that land on flowers that honey bees have depleted.) Honey bees communicate through a waggle dance in which scout bees return to the nest and inform new recruits about the distance and direction to a newly discovered flower patch.

