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The Vegan

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POLLINATOR POWER

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BEYOND BEES AND BUTTERFLIES

Appreciating the pollinators we overlook

For the ethical vegan, navigating the summer onslaught of biting, stinging winged things can feel conflicting.

Wasps dithering around our picnic tables, the insidious whine of a mosquito at bedtime or a persistent fly descending on our dinner not only provoke an urge to swat – or even weaponise a shoe – but may also prompt us to wonder: "What good is a fly/wasp/mosquito anyway?"

Here's the thing. Every insect has earned their rightful place in nature. And one credential many species have in common is their role in pollination – integral to the production of essential crops including fruits, nuts and oil-producing plants.

Bees and butterflies are often credited with this service – pictures of pollen-dusted bums abound while the reverence of photogenic butterflies needs no justification.

And since both are sadly in decline due to urbanisation, climate change and chemical-intensive farming, it's time to shine a light on some of our under-appreciated anthophiles. From pollination to their position in the food chain – here's why more insects deserve a second chance this summer.

Wasps

Known for their painful sting and voracious appetite, it's easy to overlook – or question – wasps' positives.

Their effectiveness as pollinators is an emerging picture, albeit a positive one. Studies suggest wasps can serve as a buffer against bee decline, providing a safety net where bee populations might be struggling.

A landmark study published in *Biological Reviews* in 2021 addresses the historical neglect of wasps and emphasises their role alongside bees. In it, researcher Ryan Brock notes: "We know remarkably little about the ecosystem services wasps offer, including as important pollinators and as nature's pest controllers. Aculeate [stinging] wasps are likely to perform essential ecological and economic services of importance to the health, well-being and nutritional needs of our planet."

As key invertebrate predators, they are a handy barometer in determining the health of an ecosystem. Wasp larvae's appetite for insect prey – including crop-munchers like caterpillars and greenfly – is crucial to maintaining ecological equilibrium.

It's usually the tail-end of summer, when larvae have

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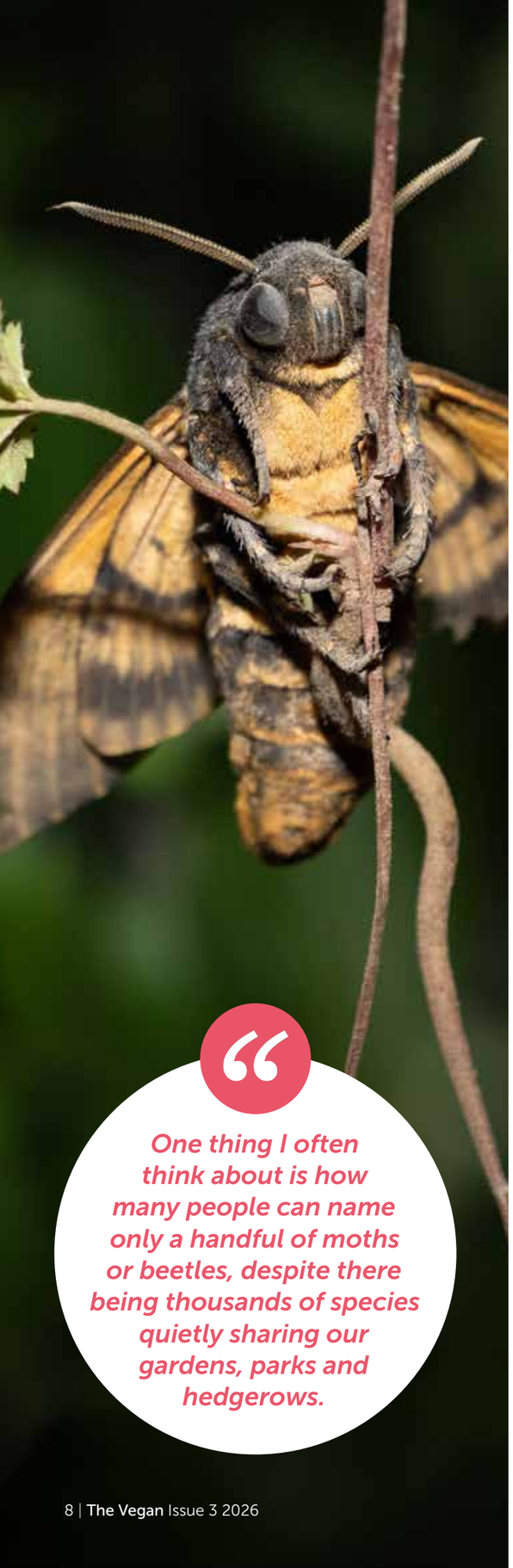


> *One thing I often think about is how many people can name only a handful of moths or beetles, despite there being thousands of species quietly sharing our gardens, parks and hedgerows.*

pupated, that adult wasps will come for your ice-lolly or cider. This is partly because a sugary secretion is provided by larvae once they have been fed the necessary protein.

Vegan environmental artist Ed Harrison agrees wasps are often judged by encounters around picnics or bins, rather than by the "important ecological role they play". He says: "They're remarkable pollinators, pest controllers and part of the balance of healthy ecosystems. I think fear and misunderstanding often overshadow fascination."

Swatting and panicking will only exacerbate hangry wasps. If they approach, try to stay calm and move your arms in a slow and controlled manner. Since they are opportunists, try placing a sacrificial morsel a short distance from your picnic table or barbecue.

Flies

Believe it or not, Google 'flies' and 'pollination' and the phrase 'unsung heroes' abounds. Flies – including the reviled bluebottle – transport pollen from flower to flower and are thought to be surpassed only by bees in the pollination stakes. While they don't have the structural equipment of honeybees, the general coating of pollen across their body hair makes it easier to deposit.

And, not to dismiss the elephant in the room – yes, even their partiality to excrement serves a purpose. It might be an unpleasant thought, but flies' (un)savoury palate reflects their natural role in recycling organic matter. Flies help to clean up manure, speeding up the decay process and the subsequent return of soil nutrients. Fly larvae also help process food waste while cutting methane emissions.

But, since we would prefer not to entertain flies around our picnic tables and homes, there are natural repellents such as lavender and citronella, which can be diluted and sprayed in water in fly no-go zones. Rotting fruit can be used to distract flies and other insects from your meals.

Moths

These celestial navigators are commonly overlooked and feared for their hairy bodies when, in fact, like the beloved bumble, their delicate fluff is all the better for stowing pollen. Globally, there are 160,000 species of moths, many with complex patterns evolved for survival in their respective and changing environments. During the 1800s' industrial revolution, it was observed the peppered moth turned darker to better camouflage against the sooty landscape. Others, like the elephant hawk moth, are blessed with luminous colours to deter predators.

Some moth species visit specific plants while night-blooming flowers, such as evening primrose, have evolved specifically to attract them. As well as filling these ecological gaps, some varieties travel incredible distances, helping to promote cross-pollination and critical biodiversity.

It's typical to see moths bumping around lights. This is because they use natural light sources for orientation and electric lights can throw them off course. This, along with climate change, is a contributor to moths' decline.

Consider turning off outdoor lights at night when not in use and drawing your curtains to avoid confusing these denizens of dusk. If you have a garden, consider adding light-coloured and tubular flowers such as evening primrose and honeysuckle for a moths' midnight feast.

Beetles

Arguably not considered pests but certainly overlooked, beetles are among the world's oldest pollinators, with fossil records dating back to the age of the dinosaurs. It's thought they may have had a hand (or leg) in the pollination of some of the Earth's earliest flowering plants, or 'angiosperms'.

Beetles are specialist pollinators, meaning some flower species have adapted characteristics to attract them. This includes a strong scent since beetles primarily use smell to scout out nectar sources and, since their ravenous appetites have earned them the title 'mess pollinators', many flowers have developed tough and robust petals for protection (anyone else think they may have been a beetle in a past-life?). They usually supply pollen in abundance so the excess sticks to the beetle as they continue in pursuit of nectar. Beetles are attracted to blooms with accessible open and flat structures, often yellow or white in colour. Planting or encouraging flowers like sunflowers, wild marjoram, oxeye daisies, garden angelica and yarrow will provide a tasty beetle buffet.

And finally... even mosquitos

Even ethical vegans might be tempted to think of mosquitoes as an exception to the rule. With bites that turn into sore, itchy welts, nights spent fearing for our flesh and not least the transmission of deadly diseases, it's hard to argue their case. But wearily speaking (as a mosquito delicacy myself), I feel obliged to dredge up yet another 'also pollinators' argument. The mosquito relies more on nectar for sustenance than blood, which is only consumed by females after mating to kickstart egg production. There are also certain flowers, including some orchids, which rely on mosquitoes for pollination.

Mosquito larvae is a food source in freshwater systems, while the larva themselves feed on organic waste (such as dead bugs), recycling it into nutrients for plants. Meanwhile, airborne adults provide a substantial meal for bats and birds.

To avoid becoming a mosquito buffet, there are a number of anti-mosquito products registered with the Vegan Trademark – a win for all involved.

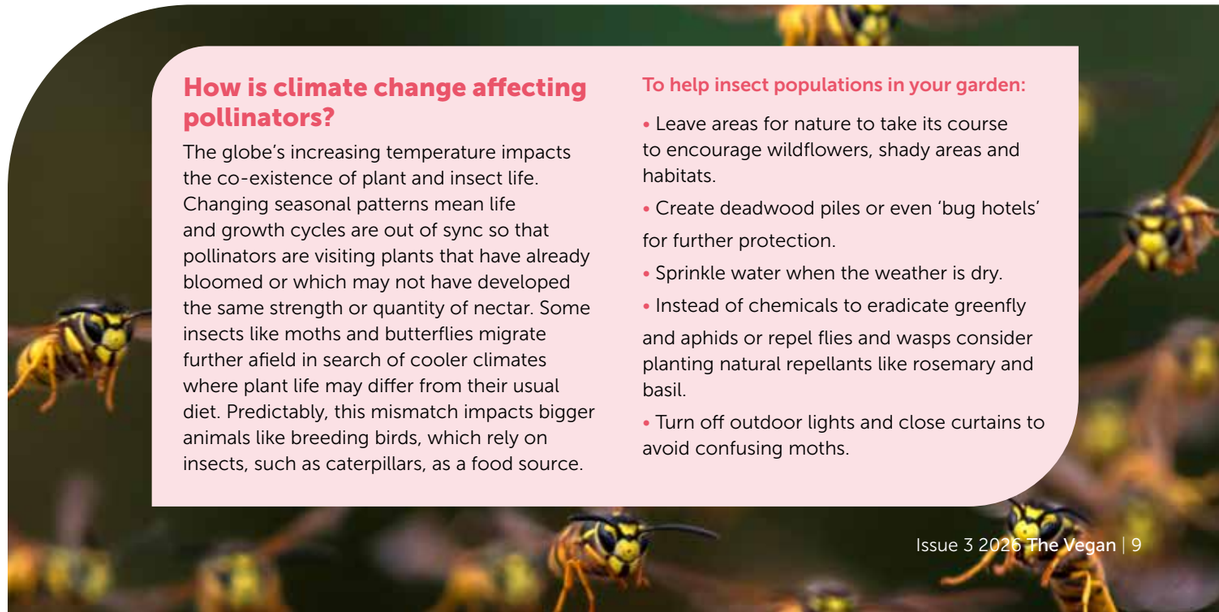
The sum of nature's parts

"Learning to value the overlooked parts of the natural world feels deeply connected to how we build a more caring and ecologically aware society," says Ed whose insect papercut series is a celebration of entomology. He adds, "One thing I often think about is how many people can name only a handful of moths or beetles, despite there being thousands of species quietly sharing our gardens, parks and hedgerows. The more we learn to notice them, the more wonder and connection we tend to feel towards the living world around us."

Next time you're tempted to take a swipe at an unsuspecting winged thing –or if you're around others losing their patience – remind them that every insect has a place in the complex tapestry we call nature. Though perhaps it's a conversation best served after dinner.

And if that isn't enough to convince you...

- Wasps' use of chewed bark to create nests may have been the inspiration for paper.
- Midges are primary pollinators of the legendary cocoa bean.
- There's a variety of scarab beetle disguised to look like a bee to fool potential predators.
- Bees and ants are evolutionary descendants of ancient wasps.
- Only two of Britain's 2500 moth species are the wardrobe-munching variety.



How is climate change affecting pollinators?

The globe's increasing temperature impacts the co-existence of plant and insect life. Changing seasonal patterns mean life and growth cycles are out of sync so that pollinators are visiting plants that have already bloomed or which may not have developed the same strength or quantity of nectar. Some insects like moths and butterflies migrate further afield in search of cooler climates where plant life may differ from their usual diet. Predictably, this mismatch impacts bigger animals like breeding birds, which rely on insects, such as caterpillars, as a food source.

To help insect populations in your garden:

- Leave areas for nature to take its course to encourage wildflowers, shady areas and habitats.
- Create deadwood piles or even 'bug hotels' for further protection.
- Sprinkle water when the weather is dry.
- Instead of chemicals to eradicate greenfly and aphids or repel flies and wasps consider planting natural repellants like rosemary and basil.
- Turn off outdoor lights and close curtains to avoid confusing moths.