

WASP LIFE

The Social Wasp

We always think of a wasp as a vindictive insect, ready to sting anyone who comes near it. We often describe people who are easily angered as possessing a waspish temper. But the wasp stings only in self-defense or in protection of its colony or when angered by interference. When we come to study wasps, as well as other animals that we fear unreasonably, we find that a knowledge of their ways and life destroys our fear of them.

We can easily distinguish a wasp from a bee by the folding of the fore wings lengthwise when the insect is in repose. Another characteristic of the wasp is the peculiar form of the first segment of the thorax: it is narrow and on either side curves back round the second segment forming an angle which reposes on a scale at the base of the wings.

Let us follow the history of the common social wasp. A single queen that has survived from last year's colony is the founder of the new one.

The foundress of the colony is awakened from her long sleep by the warmth of an early April sun. She brushes off the dust on her wings and works as one in a hurry. First she feeds herself as briefly as possible and then goes out in careful search of a nesting place. This must be where there should be sufficient temperature and enough privacy.

The first step in forming the coming colony is a bit of real hard work. The queen, without any help whatever, dislodges earth and shapes the hole, carrying out all the earth not needed in her mouth. After the hole has been prepared and cleaned, the anxious queen flies to other exposed surfaces of wood. She alights and scrapes the surface, fraying it, and detaching fibres which she chews and mixes with some stick stuff which flows from her mouth. The

product is a pellet of moist wood-pulp which is carried into the burrow and fixed to a firm object in the roof. More pellets are added and all are worked into a hanging stalk from which the nest proper will be eventually suspended. The pulp is attached to the free end of the hanging stalk and worked into the form of a thin inverted saucer of paper, about half an inch in diameter. Beneath this roof a tiny platform, also of paper, is made and to it the wasp attaches a few shallow cup-shaped cells that hang mouth downwards.

In each of these first-made cells an egg is laid. As the cell hangs with mouth open downwards, each egg has to be fixed to the base of its cell. After this arrangement, the queen proceeds to add more cells and increase the area of the roof.

The first three or four eggs hatch in about eight days and now the queen has to forage for food and feed the grubs from her own mouth. The tiny grub, in order not to fall from its cell, keeps its posterior end tucked inside the egg-shell and uses it as an anchorage. After about fourteen days of hearty feeding, the grubs spin cocoons and pupate. In ten more days the perfect insects emerge. The queen now has a few assistants. (*To be continued*)

STUDY TEST ON WASP LIFE

Choose the best answer:

1. Wasps sting people for (revenge, self-defense, food, fear).
2. A wasp may be distinguished from a bee by (its head, its life-history, the folding of its wings, its food).
3. A wasp colony is founded by a (male, a worker, a soldier, a queen).
4. The nest of the wasp is made of (leaves, earth, wood-pulp, wax and pollen).
5. The queen wasp is (industrious, lazy, helpless, thoughtful).

