

# HOVERFLIES



**Do you get a buzz out of insects?**

**WATCH** wants you to take a look at **HOVERFLIES** this summer. Discover the facts about these garden visitors with **Nick Baker and Dr Francis Gilbert**.

**W**hen you're lounging in your deckchair this summer, shut your eyes for a moment. Can you hear buzzing and humming? Unless you're wearing a Walkman, you'll probably find it's coming from insects hovering and feeding at nearby flowers! At first glance you might think they are bees and wasps. But if you look carefully, you'll see that some are different. They are members of a group of flies called hoverflies.

#### **THE GREAT PRETENDERS**

Over 260 different species of hoverfly have been recorded in this country. Many look like bees or wasps. The common dronefly, (*Eristalis tenax*), a large brown hoverfly, looks very like the male honey bee or drone. Other species such as the currant fly (*Syrphus ribesii*) and the marmalade fly (*Episyrphus balteatus*) have distinct yellow or orange and black banding on the abdomen, very like the banding on wasps. These clever disguises probably save hoverflies from being eaten by birds and other predators. They would expect a painful sting!

#### **GREENFLY GOBLERS**

Hoverflies start off life as larvae. In the spring or summer, take a close look at clusters of aphids on plant shoots in your garden. A wet day or night-time are the best times to look. You may see among them a creature like a small pink or greenish caterpillar, about half a centimetre long. This is probably the hoverfly larva of a species such as the currant fly or marmalade fly. They are mega aphid eaters! A larva can chomp its way through hundreds of aphids before pupating. The larva of the dronefly is also known as a 'rat-tailed maggot'. It feeds in stagnant water with rotting matter.

To get the oxygen it needs to breathe, it uses its 'rat-tail'. This acts like a snorkel reaching up to the surface. The larvae of the pied hoverfly (*Volucella pellucens*) clears up rubbish in the nests of wasps and bumble-bees. It feeds on tasty items like droppings, food remains and dead insects!

#### **FLOWER FLIES**

Once grown into adults, most hoverflies feed on pollen and nectar from flowers. Favourites seem to be daisies, cow parsley, hogweed, roses and brambles. Some hoverflies, the marmalade fly for example, have very short mouthparts. So they can only feed on the very exposed flowers. The dronefly, in contrast, has long mouthparts and can feed on flowers with nectaries hidden deep within the flower.

#### **FOOD FOR FLIGHT**

Female hoverflies feed more on pollen than the males. The pollen helps the female produce the eggs inside her. The males feed more on energy-rich nectar. This helps fuel their flights in search of females. They will quickly dart after an insect that flies past in the hope that it may be a female.

#### **FLYING FACTS**

If you'd like to know more about hoverflies, a book entitled 'Hoverflies' by Francis Gilbert is full of information and ideas. It's published by Richmond Publishing in their Naturalists' Handbook series. Also useful, in the same series is 'Aphid Predators' by Graham Rotheray. Both books will be available from July or August. Or you could borrow them from your library.





**MARMALADE FLY**  
(*Episyrphus balteatus*)

**BUZZ OFF!**

Why not take a closer look at hoverflies in your garden? You won't even have to get out of your deckchair to do it! **WATCH** would like you to look out for hoverflies and find out which

flowers they like visiting the most. Do they like unusual flowers - or do they prefer the common ones? Here's what you have to do:

**1** Choose a metre-square section of flower bed, lawn or meadow, (with lots of flowers).

**2** Count how many flowers of each type there are in your square. Then fill in the chart following our simple colour code.



**CURRENT FLY**  
(*Syrphus ribesii*)

**HOVERFLIES**

For example, if you have 20 daisies, the code for that is brown. Write down daisies in the box under flowers, and colour the box next to it brown. If you have three roses in the same square, colour in that box blue.

**3** Then count how many hoverflies land on these flowers over 30 minutes. Write down the number in the third box.



**PIED HOVERFLY**  
(*Volucella pellucens*)

If you have trouble identifying your flowers, 'A Clue Book to Flowers' by Oxford University Press could be helpful.

**HOVERFLIES**

You could also try to spot whether you have male or female hoverflies visiting your flowers.

Why not send in your results to WATCH? -You could win your WATCH Detective Badge!

**HOVERFLIES**

• • • YOU MAY PREFER TO PHOTOCOPY THIS SURVEY RATHER THAN CUTTING UP YOUR WATCHWORD • • •



**MARMALADE FLY**  
(*Episyrphus balteatus*)



**COMMON DRONEFLY**  
(*Eristalis tenax* - dark male)



**COMMON DRONEFLY**  
(*Eristalis tenax* - pale male)



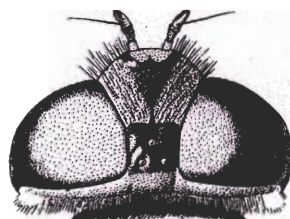
**COMMON DRONEFLY**  
(*Eristalis tenax* - pale female)



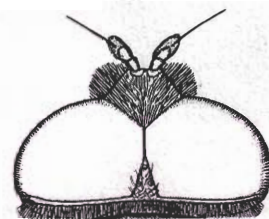
**CURRENT FLY**  
(*Syrphus ribesii*)



**PIED HOVERFLY**  
(*Volucella pellucens*)



**FEMALE EYES**



**MALE EYES**

NUMBER OF FLOWERS IN SQUARE METRE	COLOUR CODE
1	RED
2-5	BLUE
6-10	YELLOW
11-20	BROWN
21-30	GREEN
30 OR MORE	PURPLE

TYPE OF FLOWER	COLOUR CODE FOR NUMBER OF FLOWERS IN SQUARE METRE	NUMBER OF HOVERFLIES VISITING FLOWERS OVER 30 MINUTES



# HOVERFLIES

JUST WHAT'S THAT  
BUZZING AT THE  
BOTTOM OF  
YOUR GARDEN?



**ALIENS!**

WATCH OUT FOR THE  
GIANT GREEN LEAFY INVASION

**ENVIROSCOPE**

BECOME AN ENVIRONMENTAL FACT-FINDER THIS SUMMER  
AND HELP CHANGE THE LOOK OF YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD