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The Cover

Some species of wasp, like the yellow jacket, are sure signs of spring. They need intense and warm sun rays to be lured from winter sleep. The wasp on the cover is of the family Vespidae, in which there are seven subfamilies, each with many species. Some, like potter and mason wasps, are solitary. But yellow jackets and paper wasps, culminating a long series of steps in evolution, are of social subfamilies.

For social wasps, it is a woman's world. Adult males emerge from their pupae and leave the nest to wait for females, who emerge a few days later. After flying about in a nuptial dance, females choose their mates. Having fulfilled their roles in mating, males simply flutter about, drinking nectar from flowers until they die.

Only the hardiest females survive the winter. These queens build nests, where they deposit eggs. The daughters and queen live together in the nest, in cooperative brood-care, each wasp being more or less specialized in the performance of certain tasks.

Humans have more than one type of interaction with wasps. Ecologists have introduced solitary species of wasps to new areas to assist in biological pest control. They have used wasps to control mole crickets in Puerto Rican and larvae of the Oriental beetle in Hawaiian sugarcane fields.

But among humans, wasps are more widely known for their sting. Venom injected through a modified ovipositor functions to paralyze insects or spiders preyed upon by female wasps; it is a mixture of enzymes and protein and includes substances such as serotonin and histamine. When injected into humans, it produces pain that varies from scarcely perceptible to unbearable. Some neuromuscular effects of multiple paper wasp stings are discussed on p 2120. (Photograph © Mike Miktrakul)—JEANETTE ALMADA

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