Wasps: The Astonishing Diversity of a Misunderstood Insect
Interview with Eric R Eaton by Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions
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The ultimate visual journey into the beautiful and complex world of wasps.

Source: Egor Kamelev/Pexels

Last year, I posted an essay called Some Truths About the Fascinating Lives of Wasps, which discussed an article published in *New Scientist* by Richard Jones called "Not so Waspish," with the subtitle, "They are one of the least-loved animals, but wasps deserve our affection. It's time for a rebranding." The online version is titled "Wasps may benefit us as much as bees. Could we learn to love them?" with the subtitle, "We love to hate wasps, but they pollinate flowers, kill off pests and their venom might even help us treat cancer."[1]

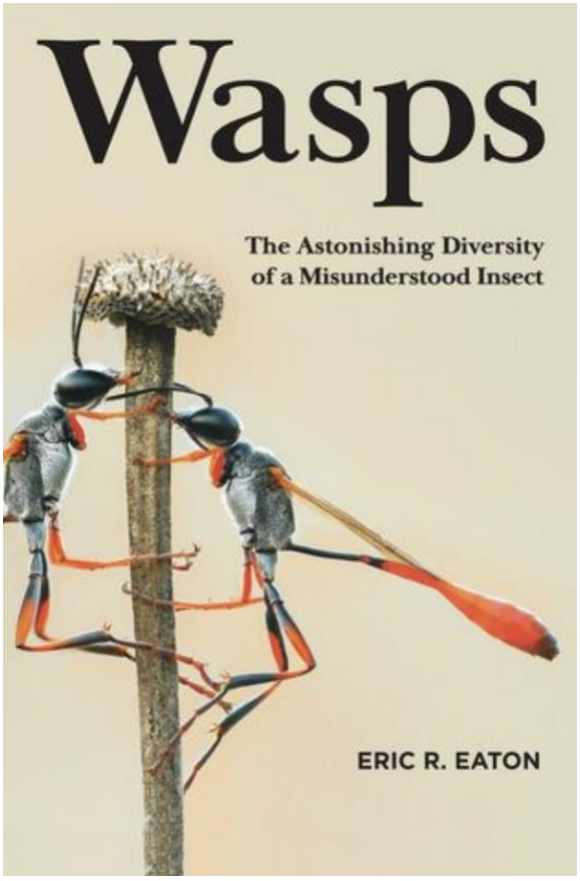
I learned a lot about wasps from Jones' essay and the references he provides, and wanted to learn more about these misunderstood insects. So, I was pleased to read a book called *Wasps: The Astonishing Diversity of a Misunderstood Insect* by Eric R. Eaton, a writer, editor, and consultant who has worked as an entomologist for many institutions.[2] Here's what he had to say about his highly informative and beautifully illustrated book about these diverse and fascinating insects.

Why did you write *Wasps*?

I wrote *Wasps* because these insects suffer from a terrible reputation that they do not deserve. We are conditioned to fear and loathe wasps by the pest control industry, social media memes, and family and friends. The media equates all wasps with hornets, yellowjackets, and other social wasps, when in fact that is a tiny fraction of wasp diversity. Not all wasp species sting, and of those that do, only females have stings.

Most wasps are small, stingless insects that are parasitoids of other insects. That is, in their larval stages, wasps are parasites that ultimately kill their hosts. Many wasp species are pollinators like bees. Wasps are food for other wildlife. Research on wasps impacts fields as diverse as biomimicry, chemical

ecology, sociobiology, and medicine. Wasps have inspired improvements in paper manufacturing, and given us superheroes. They are reared in captivity for release into crops to control pests. Scarcely any other organism is unaffected by a wasp.



How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?

I have had an affinity for insects and other outcasts of the animal kingdom since I was in elementary school. I felt like an outsider among my peers, and while I couldn't easily stand up for myself, I could research "bugs" and convince other people that they were cool. I may have initially gravitated to wasps because no one could accuse me of being a sissy for catching something that could fight back, but the more I learned about their diversity and behavior, the more intrigued I became. That curiosity, fascination, and respect has carried forward to this day, and I remain compelled to communicate to the general public the knowledge I learn.

Who is your intended audience?

Wasps is aimed squarely at non-experts, including those who may have spheksophobia, the clinical fear of wasps. Knowledge is power, and if the book conveys anything, I hope it communicates how neutral most wasps are in relation to people, if not outright beneficial to our everyday lives. Anyone interested in nature in general will find the book appealing, engaging, and enlightening. Scientific terms are defined in the text, and the prose is complemented by jaw-dropping images.

What are some of the topics that are woven into your book and what are some of your major messages?

The overarching themes of the book are wasps in the greater contexts of natural ecosystems, human enterprise and culture, and coexistence with people in urban, suburban, and rural environs. Throughout the book, there are profiles of different wasp species, and spotlights on unique behaviors or relationships to other organisms. The book introduces wasps from all corners of the world, and ends with a wasp family album summarizing selected families of wasps. This is not a field guide, but a general introduction to wasps.

How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?

There are few popular works about wasps that offer a positive perspective. Fewer still properly define wasps to include solitary species. Most of the better works are decades old, like *Wasp Farm* by the late Howard E. Evans. Evans was a masterful storyteller, relating his observations of wasps in suspenseful fashion, spiked with humor and empathy. More recently, Eric Grissell's *Bees, Wasps, and Ants: The Indispensable Role of Hymenoptera in Gardens*, specifically addresses the relationships of wasps and their relatives to backyard ecosystems. It is a credit to publishers willing to risk printing books about any insects other than butterflies, but the impact of the literature in turning public opinion, and improving understanding, can be profound.

What are some of your current projects?

A good author never discloses his next project, if only because the final decision is never up to them. What sees the light of day often hinges on the opinion of the agent or publisher, or is determined by the whims of the marketplace, or all three. I am a writer first, everything else a distant second, but my heart will always be in restoring healthy relationships between humanity and nature. Curiosity, reverence, and sacrifice are at the core of all I write.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell readers?

Insects are wildlife, too! "Pests" occupy our collective psyche as mostly mythical creatures we have created through enterprises incompatible with natural ecosystems, through the introduction of species to foreign lands devoid of natural predators, and through intolerance. Risk, liability, and fear can rule our policies and practices, or we can embrace new landscapes, install new traditions, and forgo wealth and status as our governing principles. The choice is not prosperity or austerity, but equilibrium and less psychological stress.

References

Notes:

1) The book's description reads: Wasps are far more diverse than the familiar yellowjackets and hornets that harass picnickers and build nests under the eaves of our homes. These amazing, mostly solitary creatures thrive in nearly every habitat on Earth, and their influence on our lives is overwhelmingly beneficial. Wasps are agents of pest control in agriculture and gardens. They are subjects of study in medicine, engineering, and other important fields. Wasps pollinate flowers, engage in symbiotic relationships with other organisms, and create architectural masterpieces in the form of their nests.

This richly illustrated book introduces you to some of the most spectacular members of the wasp realm, colorful in both appearance and lifestyle. From minute fairyflies to gargantuan tarantula hawks, wasps exploit almost every niche on the planet. So successful are they at survival that other organisms emulate their appearance and behavior. The sting is the least reason to respect wasps and, as you will see, no reason to loathe them, either. Written by a leading authority on these remarkable insects, *Wasps* reveals a world of staggering variety and endless fascination.

2) Eric R. Eaton is a writer, editor, and consultant who has worked as an entomologist for several leading institutions, including the Smithsonian (private contract) and the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden. He is the lead author of the *Kaufman Field Guide to Insects of North America* and the coauthor of *Insects Did It First*. He runs the blogs *Bug Eric* and *Sense of Misplaced*. Twitter @BugEric.