Hoverflies



Hoverflies are interesting creatures. At this time of the year when the Michaelmas Daisies are in flower they can be seen in large numbers hovering over the flowers before perching to feed on pollen. They come in all shapes and sizes – from tiny frail stripy things to the largest – the Hornet Hoverfly. These are impressive beasts – see picture on the right - as befits their name, about 2 cms long and quite broad, with a yellow face, huge brown eyes, a chestnut thorax and black and yellow striped body.





Most hoverflies are much smaller and slighter creatures – in fact they often have very slim and flat bodies which makes them seem quite insubstantial. One of the most well-known is the Marmalade Hoverfly, so-named because of its orange coloration which of course you can't see in this picture on the right. There are many similar hoverflies, often striped in black, white or yellow and they can be easily seen on summer garden flowers such as buddleia, mint, marjoram and all sorts of daisies as they feed on nectar and pollen. It is fun to try and identify them though unfortunately there always seem to be many similar species!

There is a whole group of hoverflies which mimic honeybees and bumble bees and they can indeed be quite convincing. As I write this there are many of these on the Michaelmas Daisies and you have to look twice to check that they are hoverflies. The huge eyes, very short antenna, lack of hair and wings parked like a V-bomber are the things which give them away.





Very few hoverflies have common English names but the one pictured on the right, which can be found in and around ponds and wet places, is nick-named "The Footballer" due to its striped jersey!

Like other flies, hoverflies go through four stages of insect life: egg-larva-pupa-adult. The larvae of hoverflies are remarkably diverse for just one family of flies. Some have adapted to aquatic life in extremely dirty water (including stagnant), eating all kinds of decaying materials. In order to breathe they have a long tube at the rear end of the body, which they stick into the air giving them the name of rat-tailed maggots (about 40 species). Some live in decaying wood, or sap runs on live trees (33 species). However, over one third of hoverflies have larvae that eat aphids (over 110 species) – they are very welcome in gardens and can provide a useful degree of aphid control.

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