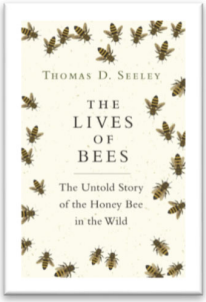
The Lives of Bees: The Untold Story of the Honey Bee in the Wild
By Thomas D. Seeley, ISBN 9780691166766



Thomas D. Seeley's *The Lives of Bees* is the culmination of over four decades of formal research and nearly a lifetime's worth of personal interest in honey bees. Indeed, *The Lives of Bees* feels more like an incredibly thoughtful, well-written, and meticulously researched doctoral dissertation than a work of popular science—but not in a bad way. What distinguishes *The Lives of Bees* from other works in the genre—as Seeley himself declares early on—is that it concerns itself not with domesticated honey bees but with wild ones.

Honey bee populations around the world are declining rapidly—both wild and cultivated. Seeley takes a deep, detailed dive into the behaviors and patterns of wild honey bees to hopefully better inform human beekeeping practices, which he describes in the final chapter, "Darwinian Beekeeping." Fair warning—this final chapter is not for the faint of heart. Human-assisted natural selection plays a heady role.

But that's getting ahead. Seeley starts his book with the singular event that sparked his fascination with honey bees, specifically wild honey bees. As an almost 11-year-old boy, he witnessed a honey bee colony swarm a hole in a black walnut tree in the woods near his home. The desire to know what caused that swarm to choose that tree on that particular day has fueled his academic pursuits ever since. Only someone truly captivated by honey bee behavior could have conducted the decades' worth of research that went into this book.

From his brief personal preface, Seeley moves into an overview of the wild honey bee populations he studies. They predominantly live in the Arnot Forest of upstate New York, near Cornell University, where Seeley works as a professor of neurobiology and behavior. After introducing his wild honey bee population, Seeley offers his readers a brief history of the human relationship with honey bees and their honey, as well as the process of domesticating these wild animals. Seeley presents the argument that although humans may claim to have successfully domesticated honey bees, they are largely deluding themselves. He rests his case on the evidence presented in subsequent chapters, that the lack of distinction between the behavior of honey bees living in the wild and those living in man-made apiaries suggests that they might not be so very different after all.

He starts with the nest—where the worker bees build their combs, the queen bee lays her eggs, and, most importantly to humans and to bears, where the honey is made. Perhaps one of the most interesting tidbits this chapter has to offer has very little to do with honey bees themselves, but rather the nature of the scientific research process. Seeley admits that he originally believed most honey bee nests to be close to the ground, based on earlier surveys of the forest. However, further research revealed the opposite to be true. Many honey bee swarms seem to purposefully choose nest locations higher up in trees, making them less susceptible to attack by a hungry black bear seeking a sweet treat.

After describing the living conditions of the wild honey bee, Seeley moves into their annual life cycle, colony reproductive processes, methods of food collection, temperature control techniques utilized in cold winter months, and colony defense mechanisms, before finally addressing his recommendations for Darwinian beekeeping.

The Lives of Bees is very technical, but Seeley does an excellent job illustrating his subject matter, both with his careful and descriptive diction and his numerous figures and diagrams, all printed in full color on thick, glossy paper. I wouldn't recommend this book unless you have a healthy interest in bees, beekeeping, or even insects in general. But if you do, you'll definitely enjoy it.

Review by Jeanette S. Ferrara, MA