

The Secret and Slightly Evil Diet of the Bee-Fly

Now you may be wondering why I should bother writing about such an insignificant little insect as a fly. You may be thinking it's because my head is full of useless nature trivia, and you'd be right, but that's not why I'm writing about this fly. You see this is no ordinary fly. You've only got to look at it to know there's something different about it.

First of all it doesn't look like a fly. It's a pretender - an impersonator. It looks more like a bee than a fly - hence the rather unimaginative name 'Bee-fly'. It's covered in tawny coloured hair to mimic a bumble bee. Secondly there's that long proboscis. It's a wonder it can ever get off the ground with such a huge appendage. It must be like flying around all day with a scaffold pole attached to your face. Thirdly there's those long, gangly, black legs. They're more spider-like than fly-like. Finally these hairy little devils are endowed with, what seems to me, about the fastest reaction times of any creature on earth. At least they're too quick for me to photograph.



Calculated Egg-Laying



Bee-fly - It's a part-time nectar feeder

They've got excellent vision, and apparently excellent hearing too, because they can hear a camera switching on from half a mile away. Of course they'll let you look at them... just to tease you. But point a camera lens in their direction and they're gone!

You get the idea. These fast-flying furballs with stilt-like legs and super-sized tongues are not your usual flies, and if you probe a little deeper the story gets weirder still. Imagine for a moment you're sitting comfortably in your home when a neighbour drops by unexpectedly. It's a bit of a drag, as you were hoping for a quiet night in, but being a sociable soul you invite him in anyway. He makes himself at home, enjoys some of your food and drink, but after 24 hours you feel he's overstayed his welcome and isn't showing any signs of leaving. He helps himself to all the food in

your kitchen and then when supplies run low instead of going down the shops for more he turns all 'Hannibal Lecter' and starts to eat you... very slowly! It sounds like something out of a low budget horror movie but this is the reality faced by bee-fly neighbours every year.

The female bee-fly lays her eggs on the surface of the soil. It looks quite random, but it's a very calculated act. They're always dropped near the entrance hole of a solitary bee. When the egg hatches, the legless larva wriggles down the hole, and just like the uninvited neighbour, takes up residence with the solitary bee larva. It's here that the secret, and slightly sinister diet of the bee-fly begins! Being a caring parent, the solitary bee has provided her larva with a food store of honey and pollen. Sadly the solitary bee larva doesn't get to see much of it because

the bee-fly larva helps itself to this as a first course. As the bee-fly larva begins to swell on this sugary diet it needs to moult its first skin, and when it does, a strange transformation takes place. It switches from a vegetarian to a carnivore and begins eating the solitary bee larva. The really creepy thing is that instead of killing its victim, it slowly eats its non-vital organs so as to keep it alive and fresh. Only when the bee-fly larva is fully grown and ready to pupate does it kill its host.

Of course all this gruesome behaviour goes on underground, unseen, and the following spring when it emerges as an adult, hey presto, it's a nectar feeder again. All innocence and light. Who would believe that this cute-looking, although slightly weird little fly, was the product of a deceptive little flesh-eating monster. Something to think about next time the neighbours drop by unexpectedly.

More bee-fly facts at: www.uksafari.com/beefly.htm



Back on the nectar