

Client: Jonathan Cape
Source: The Spectator (Main)
Date: 25 May 2013
Page: 57
Reach: 63612
Size: 296cm2
Value: 3250.08

Saviours of the world

Mark Mason

A Sting in the Tale

by Dave Goulson
Cape, £16.99, pp. 255,
ISBN 9780224096898

We need more conservationists like Dave Goulson. Cack-handed animal killers, that is. As a child in the 1970s Goulson tried to dry out some 'bedraggled' bumblebees which had got caught in a thunderstorm. He put them on the hotplate of the electric cooker and set it to low. Then he went off to feed his gerbils. Only the smell of smoke reminded him of the now-toasted bees. His fish tank contained an electric heater whose waterproof casing he managed to break, thereby electrocuting his scaly friends.

The garter snake was more fortunate — it only got tangled up in the sellotape with which Goulson had inexpertly tried to secure the lid of its tank. A gull he tried to nurse back to health did pay the ultimate price, but its death was not in vain: Goulson practised his taxidermy skills on it. These were not extensive: using his mother's wire coat hangers, he achieved a specimen with wings slanted at awkward angles and one leg turned sideways. The overall effect was 'of a bird that had just received a large electric shock'. Company for the fish, then.

But it's because of, not despite, this curiosity that Goulson has gone on to become the respected bee expert and academic he is today. This isn't one of those natural science books that simply tells you things — it admits how much we don't know. For instance how do bees find their way back to the hive over a distance which is the human equivalent of four trips to the moon? By recounting his wonder at the unsolved mysteries Goulson makes himself a likeable and trusted voice;

his inner child is still there, though thankfully it's a bit more practical these days. That same joy of discovery was there in his heroes too. Charles Darwin used his children to help track the movement of bees, the youngsters hiding at intervals along a ditch armed with flour-filled sugar sprinklers. The white stuff made the insects easier to see.

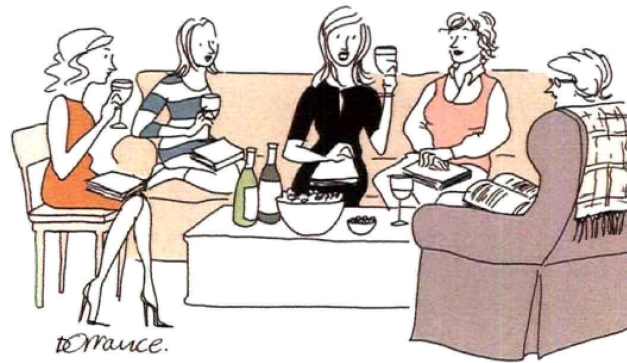
There is, mind you, plenty that we do know. Comfrey flowers are so deep that only long-tongued bumblebees can access the nectar in the normal way; not to be outdone the short-tongued brigade simply bite a hole in the side (Goulson has heard their jaws working through the petals). Bees can not only smell the odour left by the feet of previous visitors to a flower, they know from the strength of that smell whether the flower will have had time to refill with nectar.

It's a myth that all bees die after stinging you — that only applies to honeybees, and even then only because their barbed stings get lodged in your flesh, trapping them and allowing you to swat them to death. The little darlings flap their wings 200 times a second, a rate of exercise that means even with a full stomach they're only ever 40 minutes from starvation. If they were humans in that position Channel 5 would be making documentaries about them.

Numbers are in decline. Were mankind to disappear, the environment would happily revert to its state of 10,000 years ago; were insects to vanish, it would collapse into chaos. So Goulson has established the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. It campaigns for flower-rich meadows, gardens and even window boxes (city-dwellers can do their bit too). In the meantime he spreads the gospel, and provides some laughs in the process. Not all of them intended: demonstrating the bee-catching device known as a 'pooter' to some Spanish schoolchildren, he has the kids in hysterics. Their teacher quietly explains to Goulson that 'puta' is the Spanish equivalent of the F-word.



Client: Jonathan Cape
Source: The Spectator (Main)
Date: 25 May 2013
Page: 57
Reach: 63612
Size: 296cm2
Value: 3250.08



'I didn't have time to read this one, but I thought the cover really needed editing.'