Hoverflies

I recently had an email from a colleague who had found an exciting insect on the buddleias at St Brides car park. It turned out to be a Hornet Hoverfly, which is the largest hoverfly in the UK. It has only just recently reached Pembrokeshire, having spread from the south east of England. This was exciting news so the next day when I went into the conservatory to be faced with a large cross and buzzing stripy creature at least I knew what it was! We have since seen up to 2 in the garden feeding on mint flowers. They are impressive beasts 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. The Latin name is Volucella zonaria. From this picture you can tell it is a hoverfly from the way it parks its wings in a delta shape.

The Hornet Hoverfly has a close relative, Volucella pellucens, or Pied Hoverfly, which we also found in the garden on the same flowers as its larger cousin. This one looks a bit like a bumble bee and is black with a broad white stripe.

Most hoverflies are much smaller and slighter creatures – in fact they often have very slim 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. 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!

Very few hoverflies have common English names but the one pictured on the left, 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 all 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 developed a long pipe at the rear end of the body, which they stick into the air. Examples include the rat-tailed maggots (about 40 species). Other larvae hunt for plant lice or aphids. Some live in decaying wood, or sap runs on live trees (33 species). Over one third of hoverflies have larvae that eat aphids (over 110 species) – they can provide a useful degree of aphid control.

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