

Dancing With Bees: A Journey Back To Nature

by Brigit Strawbridge Howard

Review by Robin Walter (May 2020)

This book is a delightful insight into a hidden world. We are all familiar with bees buzzing around and may know something of their elegant social organisation, but I was amazed by Brigit's lucid descriptions of the extraordinary diversity of bees, just in this country, of the very different lives they lead, and of the challenges they all face.

"How had I fallen so out of touch with the natural world...?" she asks in the preface. This is a key question for all of us. As an arborist and forester, I have had a rather technical and practical relationship with the natural world, grappling with trees and woods, albeit with good intentions. In this book we are led on 'A Journey Back To Nature', back to quiet observation with no ulterior motives. It is at once relaxing and exciting to be in nature as witness and explorer.

One theme throughout the book is Brigit's constant quest for knowledge. The book begins with her realisation that she had stopped noticing the natural world around her, followed by a resolution to find her way back to an understanding of nature. So with each bee encounter there is careful recording, looking up in reference books, and appeals to the wonderful online bee community (never knew there was such a thing!), who fed back identifications and explanations. So I too now find myself stopping to examine little buzzers flitting around our flowerbeds, noting their markings, their feeding habits, their characters.

Another strong theme of the book is just how much influence these modest insects have on the natural world and, by extension, our own lives. It is only by watching bees and other insects visiting flower after flower, hour after hour, day after day, that you realise the mind-boggling enormity of the task of pollinating the flowers, trees and crops around us. Of course I 'knew' they did this, but somehow reading a detailed account of exactly *how* they did this revealed another stratum of nature which I too had ignored.

I had been to one of Brigit's excellent bee talks in Shaftesbury Town Hall, so I already had a glimpse of some of the species she introduces in more detail in the book. Indeed, seeing the different bees described in close-up slides was a real treat, something you cannot get from a guide book or website.

The only reason I am giving the book 4 stars instead of 5 is because I sorely missed having more pictures. Brigit singles out a distinguishing feature for each bee – a moustache or a marking – and gives each one character. It would have been useful to have this reflected in a colour guide to the bees mentioned. I did refer to my Collins handbook of insects, but was soon overwhelmed.

Still, at least I was inspired to look more closely by this unique book.