United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

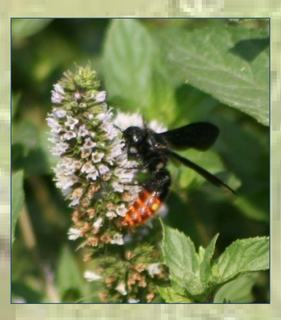
Working Insects of the Prairie

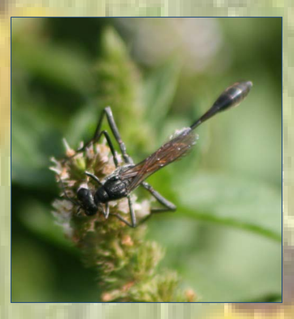
People usually think of insects in a negative light with plant-eating pests coming to mind. However, most insects that are found in the prairie, gardens, yards, or crop fields do not feed on or harm the plants. Many may feed on or are parasites to pest species; others pollinate flowers of native and crop plants that produce the seeds and fruit that people and other animals rely on for food.

Pollinators

Bees and Wasps

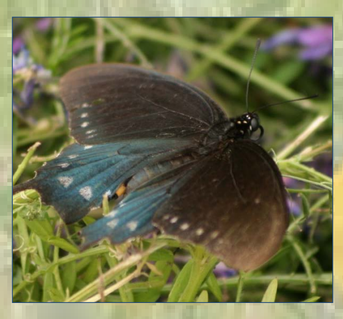
Wasps and bees both have two sets of wings, and only the females of each group can sting. Most wasps and bees are solitary insects, leaving the female to build and provision the nest for the young.





Butterflies and Moths

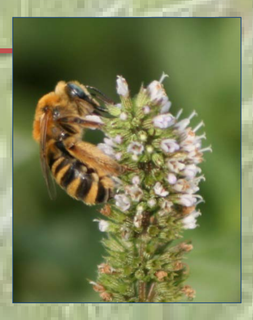
Butterflies and moths are a group of insects that have scales on their wings. Wings of both can be very colorful and many are relatively easy to identify.



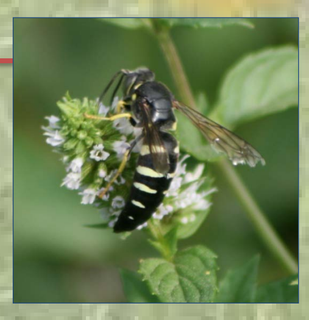
Bee vs. Wasp?

Bees are usually fuzzy bodied and are vegetarians, gathering pollen and nectar from flowers, while wasps are relatively hairless and are carnivores. Although some wasps do gather nectar and do some pollinating, their main food is other insects, often insects that are considered pests to humans. Wasps have long, thin bodies and usually have a "pinched" waist.

Bee - "fuzzy" appearance



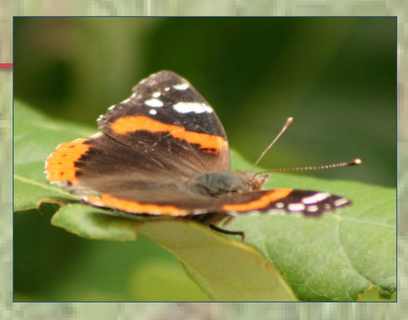
Wasp - "pinched" waist



Butterfly vs. Moth?

Butterflies have filament antennae with a knob or club shape at the end and generally fly during the day. Moths have either a filament antennae with no club at the end, or they have feather-like antennae and are usually active at night. There are some exceptions to these "rules" but they apply to most species. The differences between caterpillars of moths and butterflies are not as obvious.

Butterfly - antennae, "knob" at ends



Moth - feather-like antennae

Other Beneficial Insects

There are many insects that are beneficial to humans that are not pollinators. Predatory insects, such as assassin bugs and praying mantids, hunt and feed on many pest insects. There are also parasitic beneficial insects, such as tachinid flies and some types of wasps that lay eggs on pests and other insects. The eggs hatch and the larvae feed on the host insects, which will die as the larvae mature into adults.

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