

Spring time is 'bee time' in Estill County

Archive Story by
TRACY RANDALL PATRICK

One of the things I've learned in a lifetime of living in a beautiful place like Estill County is to appreciate all the things that nature has provided for us including the plants, insects and animals.

We place feeders in front of our window so we can watch the birds year around. We sit amazed as the hummingbird zips to and from its feeder while the house finch sneaks in for an occasional drink.

We see groundhogs feeding through our back windows and sometimes catch a glimpse of a deer or turkey in the field below the house. Late at night an o'possum can be found near the house looking for scraps. There are also those rare times when a bobcat, a gray or red fox, or coyote crosses the highway in front of your car. Even the beaver that built a mound and a dam near Calloway's Creek caught our eye.

Here of late a raccoon has been feeding below our bird feeder. We like to see all the creatures coming around, but this one has torn our feeder down several times, and it is almost unusable now. Our friend, Jim Reynolds, had coons break into his camper on the river. They ate all his food, wet his bed, and messed up the place really bad. Must be juveniles!

The insects, too, are enjoyable to watch. This time of the year, various bees are buzzing around our flowers and the clovers growing in the yard. They seem to be in such a hurry as they scurry from one bloom to the next.

It's good to see so many honey bees this year following a decline in recent years because of disease and mites. The honey bee has always been a best friend to man and is heavily depended upon for pollination of the plants which produce our food. I enjoy watching them at their work in the flowers which is neutral ground for both of us. However, when stepped on with bare feet or approached too closely to their hive, they can do things to make your eyes water. The honey bee's sting is mild compared to other bees and wasps, and they can only sting you once because their stinger pulls out into your skin and the bee later dies. But I don't want to be stung by a honey bee either.

Honey bees always seemed to have a hatred me. They attacked me when they left everyone else alone. I could get within 20 feet of our bee hives and bees would get into my hair where I would eventually get stung. I didn't understand why. I found out in recent years I have what is called "predator hair." Which means I have hair that is a similar color to that of bears and other bee enemies, so bees target me. I learned to swing a wide circle around our bee hives.

My father always raised bees as did his brother John. Robbing the bees and caring for the honey at least once a year was just one of the duties of taking care of the bees. My parents wanted me to cut weeds near the hives. I told them I would get stung. My dad who regularly worked with the bees would say, "Those bees won't hurt you." So, I cut the weeds, but I always got stung.

My dad once moved his bees. He and I carried the heavy hives without any protection about a 100 yards to their new location. That was one of the few times in my life I remember my dad cursing. We had a screen over the entrance to the hive, and about half way to our destination, it started to pull loose on one end. "Don't let them little so-and-so's get out," he said. I was more shocked by what he said than if I had been stung.

Honey bees aren't the only problem in summer. Don't forget the yellow jackets, wasps, bumble bees and hornets. I was never stung by a hornet, but while we were young and living at Cressy, we often had fruit hornets come into the house. They were about two inches long and packed a deadly stinger.

Sometimes we had five or six. We usually tried to chase them out or swat them, but we rarely took our eyes off them until they were gone. My sister got stung one time. I felt her pain, but I didn't want to trade places with her.

Yellow jackets were really bad years ago, but I haven't seen many in recent years except around picnic areas. I got most of my experience with yellow jackets years ago mowing the back yard of Ivory Hill Baptist Church. Sometimes, there were four or five nests there. A sure way to find them was to try mowing the lawn in mid-summer. After getting chased or stung, we avoided that area but watched to see exactly where their den was. Hundreds of bees could be seen going in and out of a tiny hole in the ground.

We'd come back that night with flashlights and pour gasoline into the opening and set it afire, but normally that didn't kill out the nest. You'd have to dig it out. At the entrance you would find a small paper nest similar to what wasps build but with several underground layers. But to find the real nest, you had to follow an underground tunnel to the main body which might be as much as 20 feet away and was much larger. One we dug up was a layered paper nest about two feet tall and at least a foot wide, all in an underground chamber.

Whether wasps or bumblebees, they are always discovered after its too late. Several years ago some of the younger men in our church traveled to Pine Mountain with Gary Evans who was our pastor then. His folks were buried high on the mountainside in an overgrown cemetery and we were going to clean it off. We were warned to look out for the snakes but never thought about the bees. A couple of us heard that familiar buzz and felt the stings at about the same time. We yelled out "bees" and started running. In my path lay a huge log, that was about shoulder high. I know I didn't crawl under it or go around it, but to this day, I don't know how in the world I jumped over it. However, bee stings can make you do strange things, and after a few stings, I believe I could have been competed in the Olympics.

Bumble bees are always their worst around tobacco hanging time. Every barn in Estill County seems to have a piece of canvas or old rug laying around, and that's where bumble bees usually end up at. If you drop only one stick of tobacco while hanging an entire barn full of tobacco, it seems to always fall on that old rug. While straddling the rails of the barn, there are not a lot of places you can hide. You'll get stung several times before you can climb down. A bee episode will also whittle a five- or six-man crew down to only a couple. While working for the late Ernie VanCleve, one of our hangers, Charles Dean Barnes, got stung so badly in the face both eyes swelled together. He couldn't work any more (or watch either), and the rest, whether stung or not, refused to go back into the barn. We finished the job with two of us hanging and Ernie handing tobacco off the wagon.

Each year bumble bees will build nests in our barn. One year they dragged straw inside a coil of 3/4 inch water pipe where they made a nest. Their nests are usually in something small, like a box or a bucket or a clump of grass, but they still claim the entire barn as their territory and defend it with a vengeance. When we need something from the barn during summertime, we hope it is near the door and try to slip in and out unnoticed. That rarely happens. Seconds after opening the door, a scout bee will come buzzing up and you have to try to slip away as if you hadn't been there at all. Once you close the door, you are usually safe. But one time it was different!

Several years ago I had to make a trip to the barn for some necessary item. Although I closed the door afterwards and walked away

slowly for several feet while holding my breath, I could still hear a buzz around me. I decided then it was time to try to outrun them. I ran through the middle of our garden as fast as I could go. It was one of the hottest days of the summer, and I was running out of breath but not out of bees. Meanwhile, my pants started slipping down. They dropped below my knees and finally to my ankles, and I fell flat on my face in the middle of the garden. I was worried about my rear end and what a great target it would make, but the sting was planted right on the top of my head.

It was so hot and I had run so hard, I thought I was going to have a heart attack. My only thought was that someone was going to find me dead, right in the middle of the white bunch beans, in my undershorts with my pants down to my ankles, and wonder what the heck happened!

I decided then and there I had to fight back. That swarm I imagined that was after me was now only one bee. It had already stung me once, so it didn't make much difference now. I got to my feet somehow, and red-faced from heat, exhaustion and embarrassment, I decided I was going to kill that bee with my bare hands. Although we were now 50 yards away from the nest, it was still targeting me. I watched it closely and when I got a chance I slapped at it with my hands. Luckily I got a hit, knocking the bee to the ground where I quickly stepped on it. I finally could pull my pants up and start looking for the shortest route to the house while watching for other bees. That sting hurt me for a year, and it was a lot longer than that before I went back to the barn again.

Wasps are just as bad a bees, and they like to build nests around homes. Our church at Ivory Hill has always had a problem with wasps in the attic, even when it was just a one-room block building. Just last Sunday, one "kissed" the Sammie Fike on the cheek. Occasionally one gets into the sanctuary during the service. Every eye in the congregation is suddenly glued to the wasp. From that point on, the preacher could be speaking in Swahili and it wouldn't make much difference. Eventually the wasp will drift down low enough that some Good Samaritan can whack it with The Broadman Hymnal. Then, heads will start to snap to attention as the congregation starts hearing the words of the preacher again.

I once got stung by a wasp in Sunday School class. We often had wasps in the windows, and I told everyone not to worry about them, because they wouldn't bother us. One Sunday I sat back in my chair where apparently a wasp was already sitting. It stung me in the back and I screamed out a little bit which brought out some folks from an adjoining class who must have thought our class had "got the spirit." Someone killed the wasp, and class resumed after I convinced them I would survive. My Sunday School teacher, Gloria Vance, said, "I'm sure glad you weren't hurt badly!" While considering my surroundings, I replied, "I'm just thankful that I didn't cuss!"

All the plants and creatures of the earth given to us by God have a purpose in this world, although I wonder sometimes about Japanese beetles, and conflict arises when our paths cross with such creatures as bees and wasps. While watching the honey bees work in our yard I am reminded of my grandfather, Floyd McIntosh, who raised honey bees and sat beside his hives for hours at a time watching them. He and the bees knew each other so well that the bees would often fly down on his arms and knees without ever stinging him. He once remarked that he had seen a bee that reminded him so much of a man. Grandpa had such a vast understanding of and communication with bees that mankind should try to gain with all creatures, so that we can all peaceably exist in this world.



This young, well-dressed musician is said to be James Monroe "Montie" McIntosh who was the son of the elder of many Pleasant Bush McIntoshes by Pleas's second wife Mary Jane Crouch Rison. Known brothers are James T. Rison, Benjamin Harrison McIntosh and Sanders Albert McIntosh; plus several half brothers and sisters including James G. McIntosh, father of James Richard "Jimmy Runt".



Stella McIntosh Puckett and George Harvey Puckett who lived at the junction of KY-52 and KY-213 in Ravenna. She was a good mother and housewife and he was well known for repairing guns. Stella is the daughter of James Richard and Rosa Puckett McIntosh whose family was pictured in last week's Estill Tribune. He is the son of Green William and Lucy Ann Owen Puckett. (Photo courtesy of Marilyn Puckett)



Jackson Energy 1st Class Line Technician Sean Evans is a 2012 graduate of the Lineman Training Center. Jackson Energy offers a Lineman Scholarship Program which covers tuition to the Somerset Community College Lineman Training Center. You can download the application at <www.jacksonenergy.com>. Must be in by May 22, 2020. (JEC)