



# Native Bees

## of South-Western Australia

by Bryony Fremlin

We are all familiar with the honeybee (*Apis mellifera*) which was introduced to Australia from Europe and has become well established in parks, gardens and native bushland throughout the country. **But how many of us know that Australia has over 2000 species of native bees, some 800 of which occur in Western Australia?**

While the introduced honeybee serves a valuable role as pollinator for numerous agricultural crops, as well as providing us with honey, there is a down-side: feral bees build their hives in tree hollows that would otherwise be used by native insects, mammals and hollow-nesting birds; and they forage for pollen and nectar on native flowers which are the food sources for our many species of native bees and other animals. Control of feral beehives in bushland is therefore an important conservation measure.

The native bees that people would be most familiar with and which are frequent visitors to suburban gardens are the blue-banded bees, noted for the distinct blue and black bands on the abdomen. Other common garden visitors are the leaf-cutter bees. You will know they have been when you see neat circular or elliptical pieces cut from the leaves of your roses or other plants! The females use them to construct their brood cells.

Native bee species differ greatly in appearance and behaviour. Some are tiny and inconspicuous, others large and strikingly attractive. While a few highly social northern species build hives, the bees of south-western Australia are mostly solitary and a few are primitively social. Nesting sites are extremely varied and usually species-specific. Many bees burrow in the soil, some chew out galleries in pithy stems or rotting wood and many others use hollow plant stems, burrows left by wood borers or the vacated nests of mud-wasps.

Native bees are important pollinators of the plants they have evolved in close association with over millennia. They are harmless to people and will only sting if caught. Some are common, others rare, and it is indeed likely that there are many species of native bees yet to be discovered.

We can help our native bees by protecting their natural habitats and by growing native plants in our gardens: *Jacksonia*, *Dianella*, *Lechenaultia*, *Dasypogon*, *Regelia*, *Verticordia* and *Calytrix* are just some of the many local plants favoured by these delightful little insects.

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