

Bee species outnumber mammals and birds combined

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Scientists have discovered that there are more bee species than previously thought. In the first global accounting of bee species in over a hundred years, John S. Ascher, a research scientist in the Division of Invertebrate Zoology at the American Museum of Natural History, compiled online species pages and distribution maps for more than 19,200 described bee species, showcasing the diversity of these essential pollinators. This new species inventory documents 2,000 more described, valid species than estimated by Charles Michener in the first edition of his definitive *The Bees of the World* published eight years ago.

"The bee taxonomic community came together and completed the first global checklist of bee names since 1896," says Ascher. "Most people know of honey bees and a few bumble bees, but we have documented that there are actually more species of bees than of birds and mammals put together."

The list of bee names finished by Ascher and colleagues was placed online by John Pickering of the University of Georgia through computer applications that linked all names to Discover Life species pages, a searchable taxonomic classification for all bees, and global maps for all genera and species. Ascher and colleagues recently reviewed all valid names from his checklist and from those of experts from all over the world for the World Bee Checklist project led by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History and available online (www.itis.gov).

The bee checklists were developed as a key component of the Museum's Bee Database Project initiated in 2006 by Ascher and Jerome G. Rozen, Jr., Curator of bees at the Museum, and with technical support from Curator Randall Schuh. A primary goal of this project is to document floral and distributional records for all bees, including now obscure species that may someday become significant new pollinators for our crops. The vast majority of known bee species are solitary,

primitively social, or parasitic.

These bees do not make honey or live in hives but are essential pollinators of crops and native plants. Honey is made by nearly 500 species of tropical stingless bees in addition to the well-known honey bee *Apis mellifera*. Honey bees are the most economically important pollinators and are currently in the news because of colony collapse disorder, an unexplained phenomenon that is wiping out colonies throughout the United States.

Source: American Museum of Natural History

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