

Study details honeybee coalition building

April 20 2006



A honeybee swarm bivouacs on a tree branch, waiting for scout bees to select candidate sites for a new home, deliberate among the choices and then reach a verdict -- a process "complicated enough to rival the dealings of any department committee," says Cornell biologist Thomas Seeley. Courtesy of Thomas Seeley

U.S. scientists have found honeybees employ an unusual method of deciding which site to select as a new home -- a method that involves coalition building.

Cornell University biologist Thomas Seeley, lead author of the study, said when thousands of honeybees begin to hunt for a new home, usually a tree cavity, scouts are dispatched to find candidate sites.

When the scout bees return and communicate their choices through a "waggle dance," the rest of the colony considers the choices and reaches a verdict -- a process Seeley says is "complicated enough to rival the dealings of any department committee."

To study whether honeybees always choose the best site, the researchers offered swarms four small and one superior site in size. Although the superior site was never the first one found, it was almost always chosen.

The bees' group decision-making methods, which include an open forum of ideas, frank "discussions" and friendly competition, just might help human committees "achieve collective intelligence and thus avoid collective folly," conclude the researchers.

Seeley and colleagues report their study in the May-June issue of the journal *American Scientist*.

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Citation: Study details honeybee coalition building (2006, April 20) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-04-honeybee-coalition.html>

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