It’s a bee! It’s a wasp! It’s a … *fly?*

I was out for a morning walk with my border collie Max. Although the crisp -5°C day was overcast and completely wind-still the previous night had witnessed a tremendous windstorm whip through the area, scattering leaves, needles and debris across the fresh blanket of snow.

As Max and I trundled along on the north side of our spruce tree shelter belt he bopped something in the snow with his nose and continued on, dismissing the item as unimportant. While he might have thought it wasn’t worth his valuable time, I stopped to investigate. Two membranous wings poked through the light covering of snow. I removed my glove and used a fingertip to pop the insect onto the surface of the snowbank for closer examination.

Without the research I’d completed for a hover fly article, I would have identified it as a honeybee and continued on, but not now!

I took a knee in the snow and snapped a few pictures for reference, then took a closer look. The pattern on the body had evolved to trick predators into thinking this insect is a bee (it’s fooled me for years) and to get them to leave it alone.

How do you tell the difference between a true bee and a bee mimic like a hover fly?

Honey Bee by Sally Banks

Hover Fly by Sally Banks

The main giveaways that this was indeed a hover fly were its single set of wings, and its beautiful compound eyes. Honeybees also have long antennae; hover flies don't.

Satisfied with my identification I carried on with one eye on the ground, leaving the hover fly behind for a hungry bird. I spotted a number of other members of the diptera (fly) family, but no other hover flies.

My best guess as to why there were so many flies under the spruce trees was that they sought shelter in the dense needles.

When they met their demise in the harsh -20°C October weather their bodies clung to the tree until they were dislodged in the wind. I did explore the nearby aspen grove but all I could find were small pieces of bark, snow-covered leaves and a giant wasp nest.

I went back through the pictures on my camera to find a bee to use in this story as a comparison but discovered that the bee picture I had in mind was actually a hover fly—which illustrates again how adept they are at camouflage.

As I continued my search for a bee picture I came across more hover fly photos, all of different species, and all on the same clump of thistles. This solidified the research that I'd completed earlier outlining how varied hover fly species are and how important they are to pollination.

It really is vital to protect our native areas where native species like hover flies and native bees can find food, shelter, and mates. For my entire life, these beautiful flying insects have been motoring around doing their work as the world continues on, mostly oblivious to their existence.

With the information I have now, I've discovered a new-found passion for this previously unknown beneficial insect. I look forward to finding hover flies again next spring as the flowers take over from the snowbanks.

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