



Oregon State University

The Oregon lava hole bee is seen on a flower.

New research on bees could benefit farmers

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS — New research on native bees could help Oregon farmers, support pollinators and boost public knowledge about wild bees.

Oregon State University researchers this month released the results of a 2019 statewide native bee survey, a project within the volunteer-run Oregon Bee Atlas, an initiative founded in 2018 that tracks wild bee species and their plant hosts across the state.

Andony Melathopoulos, Oregon State Extension's pollinator health specialist and assistant professor, said this powerful biodiversity dataset not only tracks wild bee species but analyzes their interactions with flowering plants — documenting which flowers certain bees prefer, for example.

Melathopoulos said this kind of information could help farmers more strategically

support local bee populations, which is not only good for bees but may give growers the ability to boost crop yields and market their products as high-biodiversity.

Lincoln "Linc" Best, lead taxonomist for the Oregon Bee Atlas, agreed.

"I think this will really empower the farm sector, the forestry sector," said Best.

The data was collected by volunteers via the Oregon Bee Atlas. Some of the volunteers are now "Master Melittologists" — a melittologist studies bees — in a program modeled after Oregon State's Master Gardener program.

In the program, Oregon State researchers train volunteers to locate, identify and preserve bees from the more than 620 species of native bees in Oregon.

For this dataset, in 2019, volunteers submitted 25,022 bee specimens from all Oregon counties. This represented 224 unique bee species and 45 bee genera. Volunteers

also collected samples from 352 unique flowering genera, resulting in the largest contemporary state-level database tracking interactions between bees and plant hosts.

The volunteers also made two big discoveries.

Master Melittologist Judi Maxwell of Grants Pass found a rare small stonecrop mason bee for the first time in Oregon.

Another rare bee called the lava hole bee was found by Master Melittologist Ellen Watrous of Corvallis — the first documented in Oregon since 1969.

Many of the 25,022 bee specimens were found on or near farms, which Melathopoulos said is evidence that Oregon's diverse crop mix supports bee populations.

"Agriculture is often implicated with bee declines," he said. "That's sometimes true, but we're not the Midwest. Here in Oregon, farmers are doing a good job overall, and specialty crops are actually contributing to

many diverse types of bees."

Using the new research, farmers can further step up their efforts to support bees.

Farmers will soon be able to track which wild bee species have been found in their area and the types of plants those bees prefer. From there, Melathopoulos said, growers can see which bee-friendly plants or trees they already have and what they can add to "complete the suite."

Melathopoulos and Best said they are working with several Oregon farms, including Willamette Valley Vineyards, in trials this year to explore which plants can support wild bees.

Best and his team are developing an interactive online Oregon Bee Atlas with a map and simple user interface so that farmers can search for particular bee species or plants.

"We're working hard to publish that in the next few months," Best said.

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