

SWOSU Biology Faculty Discovers New Species of Native Bee from Oklahoma

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The new bee, known from Ellis and Blaine counties, was named *Anthidium michenerorum* after the influential bee biologist Charles Duncan Michener and his wife Mary from the University of Kansas. The new Okie bee belongs to a group of solitary bees commonly known as “wool carder bees” because their cotton-like brood cells are made of plant hairs.

“Although most people think of bees merely as honey bees, in reality there are more than 20,000 bee species worldwide,” Betancourt said. “One-quarter of this diversity occurs in North America, particularly in the western United States.”

Like most bees, the new bee from Oklahoma does not live in colonies nor does it make honey. However, it plays an important role in the pollination of wild and cultivated plants. Betancourt said bees are the most important pollinators of plants on the planet and their greatest abundance and diversity is in warm-temperate and dry areas.

“The United States has almost twice the number of native bee species found in Brazil,” said Dr. Terry L. Griswold, a scientist at the USDA bee lab in Logan, Utah and coauthor of the research article published this summer in the Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society.

Researchers have estimated that in North America alone bees are essential to the production of about 3 billion dollars worth of fruit each year. Thus, recent studies of populations and species declines worldwide have raised global environmental and economic concern.

“Bees are disappearing in front of our eyes, unfortunately, well before we can learn anything about them,” Betancourt said. “The bee fauna of the U.S. is relatively well known but identifying the majority of species is often difficult and sometimes impossible, even for specialists, because identification guides are outdated, many species are known from only a few samples, many are new to science, and many areas of the country are still poorly surveyed, including Oklahoma.”

Twenty other new bee species, 10 of them from North America, were also documented in the same article announcing the discovery of the Okie bee. As research continues, many other new species are expected to be discovered and documented.

“Next time you see a bee on a flower in your garden, you might be looking at a new bee species”, Betancourt said.