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Introduction

On any fine day between April and October, whether you are in the countryside or in an urban or suburban park or garden, you are likely to come across brightly coloured, black-and-yellow flies hovering around flowers. Although they are trying to convince you they are wasps or bees, they are actually hoverflies. They are such constant flower visitors that, in some other parts of the world, they are called 'flower flies'.

At the time of writing, 281 species of hoverfly have been found in the British Isles, although more are being discovered at an average of about one species per year. Many are quite easily recognisable because of their bright colour patterns. This book aims to introduce this fascinating family by making it as easy as possible to identify some of the commoner and more distinctive species. However, it is important to be aware that a fair proportion of British hoverflies are **not** easy to identify in the field. In many cases, detailed examination of microscopic characters is needed to be certain of their identity. In total, 165 species are illustrated and described in this book, concentrating on the ones you are most likely to find. However, in order to show the full variety of hoverflies, at least one example from each of the 70 genera occurring in Britain is included. The sections on **Identifying Hoverflies** (page 45) and **Further reading** (page 286) provide information on where to go next if you want to take things further and tackle some of the more challenging species.

It is also important to understand the way in which hoverflies are classified in order to be able to fully appreciate the relationship and similarities between species. The **Guide to the tribes** on page 51 attempts to shed some light on this complex and, at first glance, confusing situation and provides a starting point on the path to attempted identification.

This book is illustrated with a combination of field photographs and close-up digital images which show in detail the characters used in separating the species.

Marmalade Fly *Episyrphus balteatus*
on *Common Ragwort*.



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Up-to-date distribution maps and diagrams showing the flight periods are derived from the Hoverfly Recording Scheme (see *page 283*). Icons have been included as an indication of the difficulty of identification. Comments in the descriptions are also included to make it clear whether identification is possible in the field.

The availability and sophistication of digital cameras is leading more and more people to take pictures of insects in the field and subsequently seeking to identify them. There is a growing trend for this to be regarded as an alternative to the collection of specimens, but photography remains just one part of a bigger process of making an accurate identification; the species accounts indicate where photographs can be reliably used for this purpose. The arguments around the ethics of collecting specimens are covered on *page 281*.

Apart from being attractive and interesting, hoverflies also play important roles in the environment. Most gardeners know that hoverfly larvae are voracious predators of aphids and are, therefore, 'friends'. However, there are two species (the Greater and Lesser Bulb Flies) whose larvae tunnel in daffodil and other bulbs and are therefore not so welcome in the garden.

Most hoverflies do not have common names. There are a few that do; for example the Drone Fly *Eristalis tenax* and the Marmalade Fly *Episyrphus balteatus*. It has been suggested that common names should be invented for the rest, but this is unlikely to work. Common names catch on because they sum up some aspect of the species' appearance, behaviour or habitat in a way that is memorable. Contrived names seldom manage this and often end up being no more memorable than the scientific name they try to replace. So, the few common names that have become established are used where appropriate but otherwise scientific names have been used.

Like many insects, hoverflies are sensitive indicators of the health of our environment. They are short-lived, fast-breeding and show rapid changes in both range and abundance in response to change: these responses can be detected and interpreted. Some of the changes that have been revealed by analysis of records collected by the Hoverfly Recording Scheme are discussed in later sections of this introduction and in the species accounts.

Hoverflies are the most attractive and accessible group of flies, so you might expect that there would be plenty of popular literature about them. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The standard work is *British Hoverflies* by Alan Stubbs and Steven Falk, originally published in 1983 and fully revised in 2002. However, this is available only through specialist suppliers of entomological works. *A Naturalist's Handbook (No 5)*, by Francis Gilbert in 1993, is not intended as an identification guide but provides much interesting information about their natural history. However, *The Natural History of Hoverflies* by Graham Rotheray and Francis Gilbert is a recent account of what is known about this family apart from identification. It is hoped that this **WILDGuides** publication will plug this gap and provide an introduction that allows people with at least a passing interest to get started.

Inevitably, a number of technical terms are used when referring to hoverflies. Whilst these are explained in the text where appropriate, for ease of reference all are defined in the **Glossary** starting on *page 42*.