

MINNESOTA BEE ATLAS

Bee Blocks

2017 Volunteer Handbook

Block number _____

Block location _____



Welcome! You've probably heard news stories about how bees are in trouble and our food supply is at risk. Although this makes for some catchy headlines, these reports typically refer to honey bees, an introduced species that is managed for our convenience. The truth is, we know much less about the native bees that live in our state. With your help, the Minnesota Bee Atlas will fill in critical gaps in our knowledge of stem-nesting bee distribution. This guide will provide you with the basic information you will need to hang your bee block, register your block, and monitor your block. Monitoring a nesting block is a great opportunity for you to see wild bees in action and contribute valuable knowledge about their whereabouts in Minnesota.

MINNESOTA BEE ATLAS

The Minnesota Bee Atlas addresses the need for greater information on bees native to Minnesota. In order to know if native bees are experiencing decline or if factors like pesticides or climate change are threats, we need data on which bees live where in our state. One of the knowledge gaps is in the distribution of stem-nesting bees. Your observations and participation will help us identify the species of stem-nesting bees we have in Minnesota. Combined with information from the University of Minnesota Insect Collection, the Minnesota DNR, and other sources, we will this data will be recorded in a database that anyone in Minnesota will be able to access.

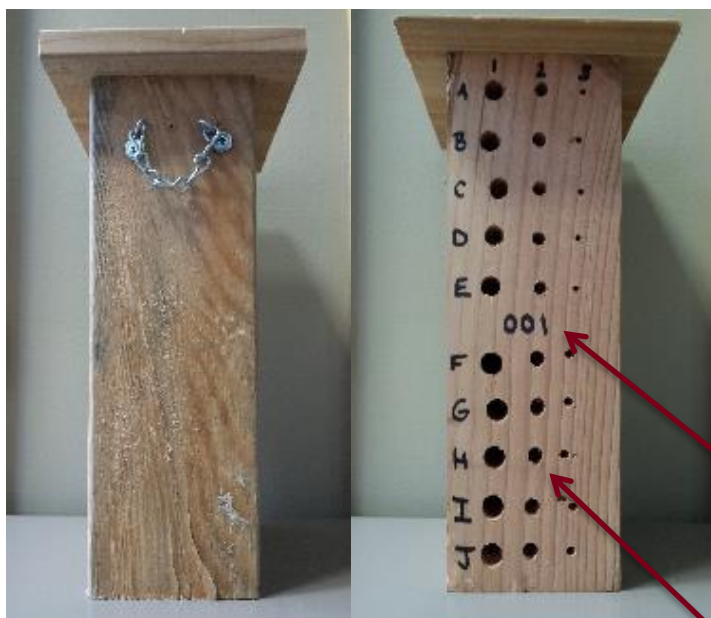
STEM-NESTING BEES

In addition to the introduced European honey bee and our roughly 18 species of bumble bees, there are likely over 400 other species of bees in Minnesota! Most of the remaining species are solitary, meaning each female nests by herself instead of in a large colony. Of these solitary bees, 15-20% build their nests in tunnels in wood or stems. They may utilize existing holes or chew their own. After locating a suitable hole, the female bee begins to build a little room, called a "cell," for each of her offspring. As each cell is built, the female stocks it with a mix of pollen and nectar and lays an egg. She then closes the cell and starts on the next one. Once the female has made as many cells as she wants or can fit in the tunnel, she will cap the nest and most likely go on to build more nests. Nesting females usually die sometime during the summer or fall and the next generation of bees develops in the tunnel. Sometimes the next generation will emerge as adults the same year they were laid as eggs, but in our climate, the young will generally overwinter either as mature larva or as dormant adults and will not come out of the tunnel until the following spring.



Three cells of the stem nesting bee *Hylaeus spp.*, each containing a nearly mature bee in the pupal stage. Note the dark eyes, leftover reddish food provisions at the bottom of the cells, and a pithy plug capping the nest. (Photo Colleen Satyshur)

INTRODUCTION TO YOUR BEE BLOCK



In the photos on the left, you see an assembled nest block. The roof was removed for shipping and you will have to attach it using the pre-drilled hole and screw. Use a screwdriver to attach the roof to the top of the block. The thick side of the roof should be at the back of the block. The roof will help keep rain and snow out of the nest holes.

Your block comes with an individual registration number printed in the center front. This unique number will be used to identify the location each bee was found.

Each hole is identified by a unique letter/number combination (eg H2). Bees will use the six different-sized holes to build nests and lay eggs. The unique letter/number identifier will allow us to track activity in each hole.

There is small length of chain on the back that can be used to hang your block.

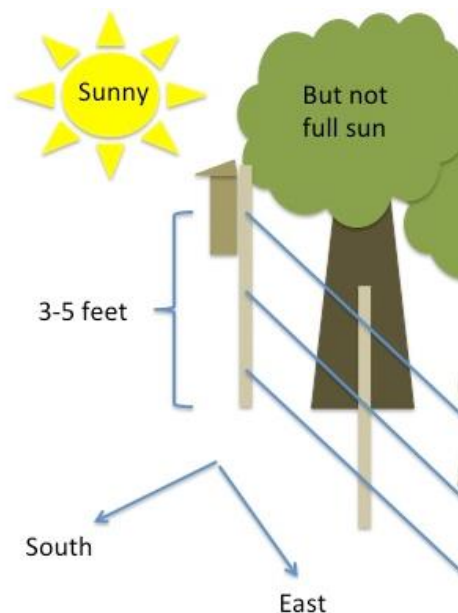
WHERE TO HANG YOUR BLOCK

The following recommendations were created to help you find a location where you are most likely to attract bees. We understand it may not be possible to meet each qualification so use your best judgment as you choose a location to hang your block. The most important things are that you mount the block securely so it won't move in the wind and you keep the block in the same spot for the entire monitoring season. Bees use visual cues to locate their nest hole and may not be able to find the block again if you move it.

- **Support:** You may choose to hang your block on a tree, fence, sign, building, or other secure structure. You are more likely to have bees use your nesting block if you mount it on a dead tree, post, or building. If you are not the landowner, make sure you ask for permission before adding any new nails.
- **Height:** 3-5 feet off the ground. This will allow you to easily see in the holes.
- **Direction:** Facing south, east, or somewhere in between. It is thought that these directions allow early morning sun to warm up nests and bees so they can get an early start on their day and be more productive.
- **Accessibility:** Pick a place that you can reliably visit two times each month. You need to get to your block easily on a regular basis during the season.
- **Surrounding vegetation:** Different bees will prefer different vegetation types but make sure there will be opportunities for bees to forage near your block. Be careful that the entrance to the block will not be blocked by tall vegetation.

- Sun exposure: Aim for a spot that is not in full sun or in full shade. Full shade encourages damp conditions which may result mold or earwigs living in your holes. Full sun in the heat of the day may be a deterrent to bees. Your block may get more sun when it is cooler in spring before trees leaf out and less sun as the temperature increases in summer.

Make a note of the GPS coordinates when you hang your block and write them on the front of this book. You will need this information when you register your block. You can do this with a GPS unit, smartphone mapping app, or by using Google Maps or another online mapping program. If you are unable to provide the exact GPS coordinates for your block, you may use the coordinates for the nearest road intersection.



HOW TO HANG YOUR BLOCK

Your block will come with a small length of chain attached to the back to easily hang it on a nail. However, some land managers do not allow new nails to be added or do not want nails in trees. If this is the case, you can use a bungee cord, ratchet strap or wire to secure your block to a tree or post.



WHEN TO HANG YOUR BLOCK

You will receive your block mid-March to be ready for the first bees in April! Please mount your block within two weeks of receiving it to make sure we cover the entire nesting season.

REGISTER YOUR BLOCK

Please register your block as soon as you have mounted it at your site. This is important because it links the bees we will find to your location. Registration and data submission

will be done at www.z.umn.edu/beeatlas. First click on “Bee Blocks” on the left side of the page and then “Register” where you will be prompted to create your account. Once you have logged in, click on “Add a new block” to enter information about your block. Fill in the required boxes and click “Save.” You will only have to do this once. If other people will be helping monitor the block, you may enter them on the “Manage observers” link on the main menu page. Each block can only be associated with one user account but a user name and password may be shared by multiple observers.

PREPARE FOR FIELD OBSERVATIONS

Make sure you have your monitoring materials ready when you go to observe your block. You will need:

- Data sheet
- Pencil
- Volunteer manual with instructions
- Flashlight, mirror or otoscope to aid in seeing in holes (optional)
- Camera (optional)

A BIT ABOUT STINGS

Stings should be a minimal concern. While the female solitary bees and wasps visiting your block are capable of stinging, they are unlikely to sting. The establishment of the next generation depends on the mothers’ efforts and they will generally avoid conflict. The wasps you may see at your block are most likely grass-carrying or aphid predators. Like the bees nesting in your block, they are primarily concerned with providing for their young and are not aggressive like their more well-known socially nesting cousins the paper wasps, yellow jackets, and hornets

That said, your bees and wasps will sting if they feel their lives are threatened. Getting up close and observing your block should not cause them concern, but use common sense and don’t dig in the nest or cause any unnecessary stress. Observers who are allergic to bee stings should take appropriate precautions as they would in any general outdoor setting.

CHECKING YOUR BLOCK AND RECORDING DATA

When to check

Please start checking your block in early April and continue until the end of September. You should observe your block roughly every 2 weeks but the dates do not have to be exact. If you check early in the morning, late in the evening, or when it is overcast or rainy, you may see adult bees spending the nights in their nest holes. If you check during warm, sunny parts of the day you are more likely to see nest building or parasitism in action.

Remember, do not disturb your block while monitoring it, if the block is moved at all, bees may not be able to orient themselves and find their way back to their nest holes.

Observing your block

Get up close and look at those holes!

Bring a data sheet and a pencil to look at each hole. You may want to use a flashlight or small mirror to direct sunlight into holes or use an otoscope (the tool doctors use to see inside your ear) to see into holes better. These can be found for \$7-20 from online retailers like Amazon. We like the ones from Dr. Mom with LED lights and slight magnification but you may have to experiment to see what works best for you. Take pictures and send them to us if you can! Record what you see for each hole on your data sheet. Bring it back and enter it into our data submission web page.



Using a flashlight to peer in a hole



Observing holes with an otoscope



Recording observations

Using your data sheet to guide you, fill out the following information for each hole. These guidelines will help you understand what you are looking at.

Plug

This may be a nest plug, or nesting material, or miscellaneous loose material. Plugs seal off the end of a nest, protecting the young and may be the only sign of a nest you see. The material used is characteristic of the bee or wasp species, making plugs a very valuable source of information for us.

- A full plug will fill the entire whole diameter of the hole and indicates a complete nest has been built in your block. You may see the full plug either at the end of the hole or recessed up to an inch.
- A partial plug will look like a plug with a hole in it, or like a narrowing of the entrance hole diameter. You may see a partial plug at the end of the hole or up to an inch inside the hole. If you see a hole in a plug that was previously fully capped, this could mean

that the adult bee or wasp in the nest has completed its development and emerged or it could mean that nest was parasitized by a wasp.

- **Other material:** includes any material that is not used to seal off the hole or materials that are difficult to identify. This includes a nest in progress, but also other materials. You may see frass (the entomological word for poop) left by some non-bee or wasp that is occupying the hole or it may be nest building in progress. If you are able to see the back of a hole, you may see a mass of yellowish grainy playdough (bee nest pollen provisions) or small insects (wasp nest prey provisions).



L-R. Full plug, partial plug (bee or wasp has emerged), partial plug (nest was parasitized), partial plug (threshold built by a wasp).

For full or partial plugs, please note the material the bee used to build the plug. A list of the plugs you may see begins on the next page. Sometimes you may not be able to see into the hole or bees may add debris to another plug type, making it difficult to determine the main material but do the best you can.

There may be days when you do not see any activity at your block. Believe it or not, this is actually very important information so please record it! A lack of bees nesting in your block may mean it is too early in the season for nesting bees, there are not many stem-nesting bees in your area, or the block may not be in a place that attracts bees. Use can vary over the summer so do not get discouraged if you don't see bees using your block.

Although our study targets wild bees, you may see other invertebrates such as grass-carrying wasps, earwigs, or spiders using the nest holes. If this happens, don't panic! Record any observations as you would normally and just make a note of what you notice.



L-R: earwig, wasp, Eumenid wasp, grass-carrying wasp, spider. Photos by C. Satyshur

Nest plug categories and descriptions

On the next pages are descriptions of the different plug categories you will see on the data entry web site. Note that fresh plugs may look different than old ones and changes at your block may not be due to insect activity; for example, green vegetation will turn brown with time. Debris may be stuck to any plug type.

Mud or sand

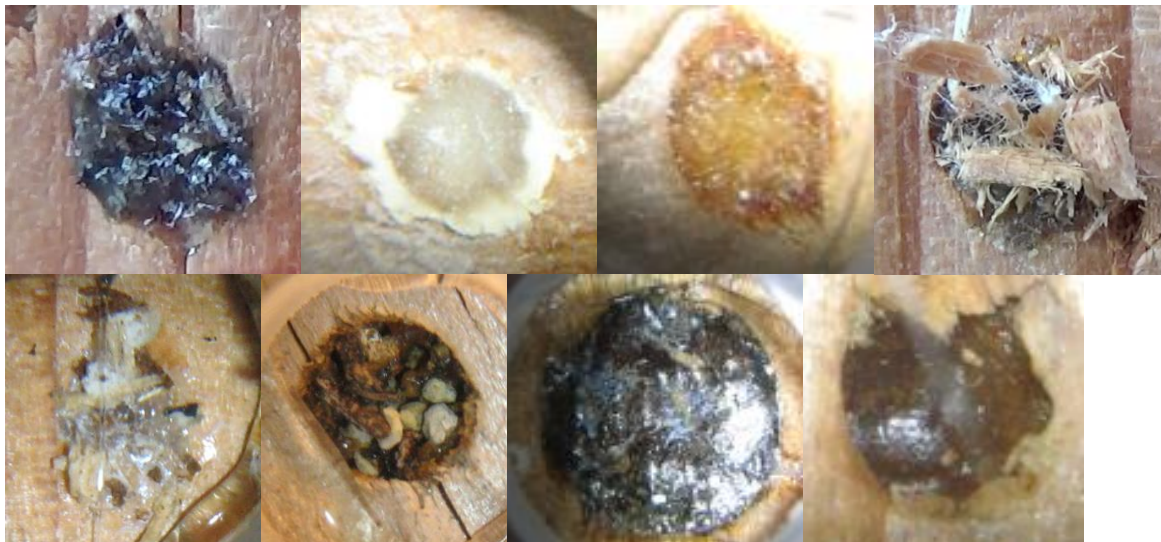
Mud and sand plugs are easy to identify as they look just the way they sound, like mud or sand in a hole. The surface can be smooth or rough and it may have stones or fibers worked into it. Plugs can be brown or grey or sandy depending on the soil in your area. These can be similar to chewed leaf plugs but are never green and have a more cement-like or packed earth quality to them. The plugs are solid, so if debris is present, it will not shift when you poke it. These are one of our more common plug types and occur in all hole sizes and are frequently broken during the summer as nests emerge or are parasitized.



C.Satyshur

Resin

Some bees use resin from trees to line their nests and plug the entrance. It may be opaque white, reddish or yellowish and may have debris worked into it. When resin plugs are fresh they are sticky; when they dry they are hard and may look crystalline. This is a very common plug type in our blocks and occurs mainly in the smaller holes. Many wasps use resin and frequently build a lip of resin inside the hole as they work on stocking their nest, which they seal off into a complete plug when the nest is done. Lighter ones may look like cellophane but are either tacky or rock hard if you touch them with a tiny twig or stiff blade of grass. These plugs may also be confused with loose debris, but debris in resin plugs will not move if touched.



Photos C. Satyshur

Grass

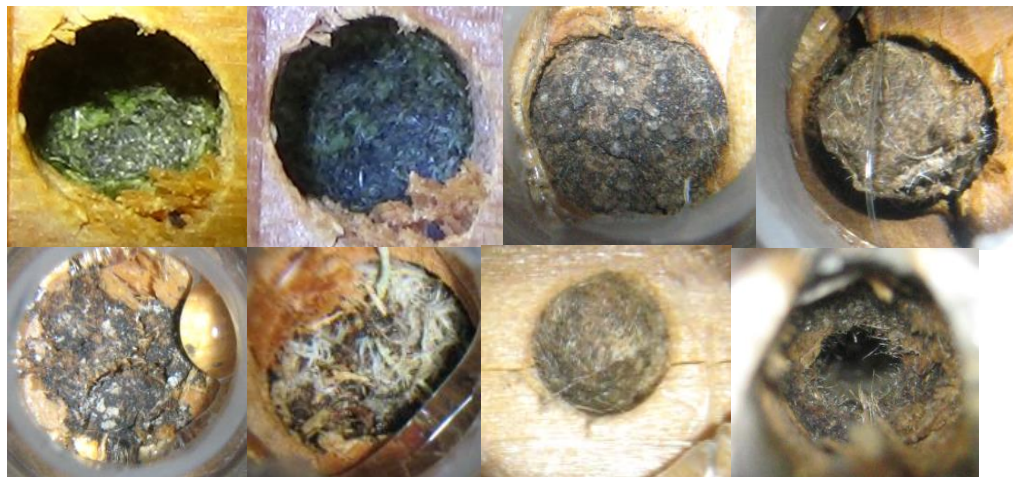
Grass-carrying wasps collect dried grass to build cell walls and plug their holes. The grass may be completely stuffed inside the hole or sticking out. Grass plugs are fairly distinct from other plug types and will occur in the larger holes. Grass wasps in Minnesota do have multiple generations per year so if you have grass plugs in early summer, you will likely see them pushed out or matted down when the first generation emerges.



In the first photo, the top hole shows where a wasp has emerged but the lower hole has not.

Chewed leaves

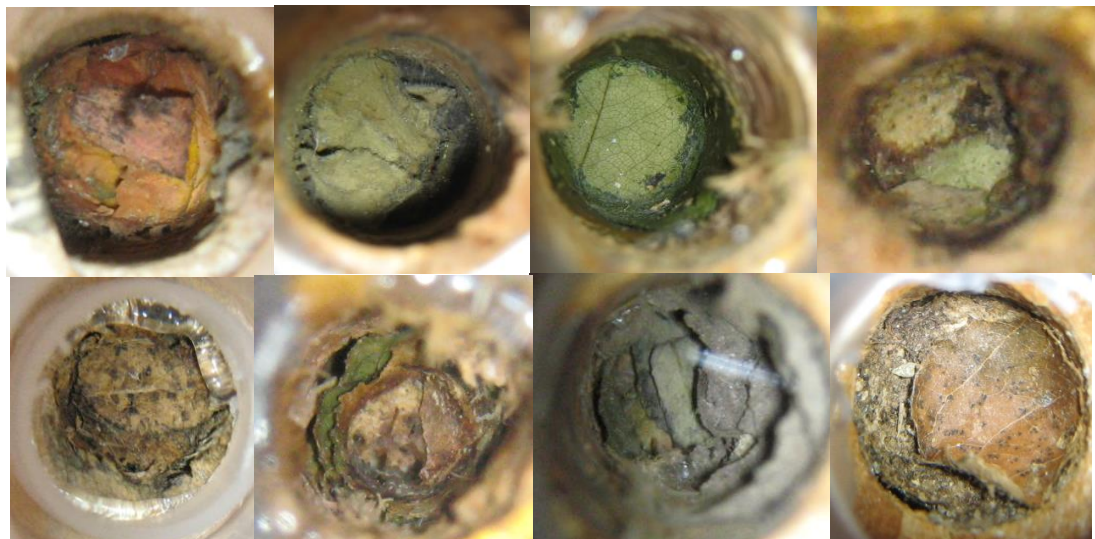
Some leafcutter bees chew up their leaves and make a paste to seal their nests. These plugs frequently start green fade to brown as they get older, when they may be confused with mud plugs. The texture is fibrous and debris may be worked in with the vegetation. Chewed leaf plugs may look like home-made paper or thick and greenish papier mache. When older they frequently dry away from the side of the hole, though remaining full plugs. These plugs are fairly common in our blocks and can occur in all hole sizes.



C. Satyshur

Whole leaf or petal pieces

These are the nests of the charismatic leafcutter bees. They snip out circles or ovals of whole leaves and bend them to form the walls and ends of their nests. Sometimes flower petals are used instead. You should be able to recognize leaf veins or edges. Leaves may be cemented in or just packed in and you may see just one piece or several to cover the diameter. These may be found in larger holes. They frequently start out green but may fade to brown or yellow. You may also see colorful petals used.



Photos: C. Satyshur

Loose debris-bits of bark, seeds, mud balls, etc.

Some wasps and bees just pack their nest entrances with loose debris they find lying around. Frequently this means mud balls, sand grains or bits of dead plants or seeds. The difference between this category and any of the others where debris is worked into the main cap material is that this debris will shift a little if you poke it with a blade of grass.

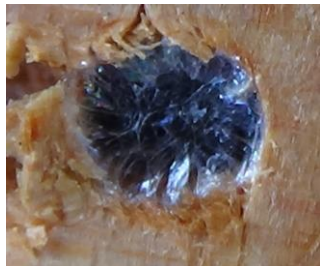


Photos courtesy of The Bees' Needs, University of Colorado Boulder

Cellophane

Cellophane plugs will be white, yellow, or translucent, and are delicate films of dried bee spit from a special kind of stem nesting bee-the yellow faced bee, *Hylaeus spp.* Some may have what look like silk fibers worked into the film. They are generally a flat film, will never have debris stuck in and will tear like tissue paper if you poke them with a stiff blade of grass. They generally occur in the smallest two hole sizes and were uncommon in 2016

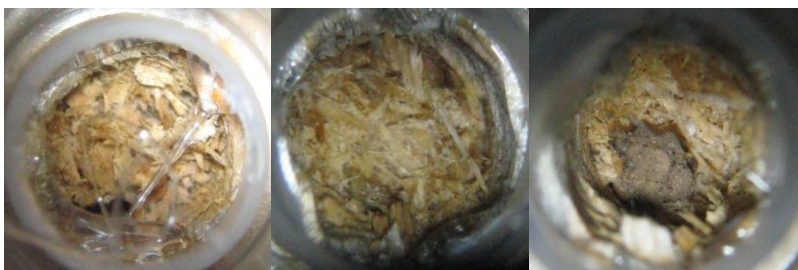
blocks. Cellophane plugs may be confused with spider webs or resin plugs. However, they are not stringy or sticky like spider webs and resin plugs will either be rock-hard or sticky.



C.Satyshur

Wood

A rare plug type, it is made of pieces of wood fixed into a plug. Wood plugs may be confused with wood debris stuck in spider webs, or resin, but in wood plugs you will not see any background material if you try to shift the pieces slightly.



C. Satyshur

Cotton

These will look like little cotton balls stuffed in the holes. Some bees scrape off fibers from plant leaves like lamb's ear and stuff them in their nest holes. There may be debris stuck to the plug. They may get matted if wet, but are not stringy like spider webs. You are more likely to see these in larger holes in urban areas. We did not record any of this plug type in 2016 though we know the bees that use plant fibers, *Anthidium* spp. are present in Minnesota.



Photos courtesy The Bees' Needs, University of Colorado Boulder

Spider webs

Spider webs are silky white or grey threads that may be only a short distance inside the hole entrance. They may seem haphazard or have intricate shapes with debris stuck in. Frequently they do not fill the entire hole but leave a slit in the center where the spider can sometimes be seen peering out. If you are unsure if it is a spider web, you may use a thin blade of grass to gently touch the material; if it bounces back or strands stick to the grass, it is spider web. Spiders can be beneficial so there is no need to disturb them, but it is important to know that hole is not available to a bee.



C.Satyshur

Unknown

Sometimes, you may see a plug that does not look like anything else in this book. Creative bees may have used an unusual material or other creatures may have used the hole. You can use the “unknown” category when you just can’t tell what is going on in a particular hole. You may want to send pictures of the plugs you see as you get used to monitoring your block. Pictures can be sent to beeatlas@umn.edu or posted to the Minnesota Bee Atlas Facebook page. We’d love to know what you’re seeing at your block!



Some strange sights from 2016

Entering Data

Entering your data is very important. The information you provide on when nests are built, which holes are being used, and what materials bees use to build their nests will help identify the adult bees we rear from your block. Learning when bees are most active may inform land management practices and policy.

To submit your observations to the Bee Atlas, visit www.z.umn.edu/beatlas and click on “Bee Blocks” on the left side of the page. Then, log in using the account you created to register your block. Each time you submit data, you will start by clicking on “Add New Observation.” The next screen will ask about the date, observer, and weather. Once you have entered that information, click on “Save and Go to Holes.”

You should see a drawing of your block to the right. You can either click on a hole for which you’d like to enter data or you can click on a column at the top to enter data for the entire column at once. Click the box next to the hole you would like to edit to fill in the hole status and material.

HAVE FUN!

This is most important – enjoy your new adventure. Look for bees peeking out of their holes on a cool spring morning. Notice the different materials that bees are bringing back to the nest. Can you tell what flowers the bees are visiting by the color of the pollen? How many different bees do you see using the block?

Don’t panic if you are having a hard time differentiating the various plug types. Plug material can sometimes be hard to distinguish; just do your best and tell us about it! Sending pictures to beatlas@umn.edu or posting them to our Facebook page is a great way for us to help figure out what kind of plug it is. You are our eyes on the ground and we value your experience and participation.

Share your experience with others! People who walk by your block and see you peering into the holes are most likely curious about what you are doing. Your friends and neighbors might wonder what you are doing when you say you’re volunteering. Tell them about solitary bees and how they can help. Share a bee pun; there are tons. We know we can’t reach everyone in Minnesota, but we bet you can.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Minnesota Bee Atlas is funded by the Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).

