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Why bees abide by the law

By Nic Fleming, Science Correspondent

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Effective "law enforcement" rather than altruism prevents insects behaving selfishly, scientists have found.

It has never been fully understood why most worker bees and wasps take care of the offspring of their queens rather than having their own despite having fully functioning ovaries.

Researchers who studied the behaviour of nine species of wasp and one species of honeybee found the proportion of female workers that laid eggs varied between the groups from 0.1 per cent to 40 per cent.

They found that the insect groups with the most effective policing — the killing of worker-laid eggs by other workers or the mother queen — had the lowest proportion of workers laying eggs.

Dr Tom Wenseleers, of the Laboratory of Entomology at the University of Leuven in Belgium, whose work is published today in the journal Nature, said: "Our results show that in modern-day insect societies it is mainly social sanctions that reduce the numbers of workers that act selfishly.

"They provide evidence for something that has proved notoriously hard to demonstrate in human society: that better law enforcement can lead to fewer individuals acting antisocially."

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