

The Diary



Martin Dawes
takes a look at life

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Watch out for the Sting!

You're dead! A tree wasp lays an egg and (inset) a police wasp eats it. Dr Tom Wenseleers and his fellow scientists at Sheffield University are studying a tree wasp society plagued by conflicts. The team hope that what they discover might help solve conflicts in the human world



Dr Tom Wenseleers: Lab will collect tree wasps for free!



University story of sex and cannibalism among wasps is all for sake of research

SEX, cannibalism and murder - and it's all there in your hedge, Dr Tom Wenseleers tells the Diary.

Things are buzzing for Dr Tom and his fellow scientists at Sheffield University's Laboratory of Apiculture and Social Insects.

Right now they've got tree wasps, *Dolichovespula saxonica*, in their sights.

You may have noticed that each year in the Diary there is a little note appealing for bees or wasps nests for the university, collected free of charge.

There's no sting and you won't feel a thing.

"We collect them and take them back to the lab to study. Tree wasps are also found in hedges and bird boxes," says Dr Tom.

He's from Belgium and is

studying the social habits of the Saxon tree wasp. They can teach us a thing or two, he says.

"They are quite remarkable. They live in highly organised

'The wasps police force ensures that any egg laid by a worker is eaten'

Dr Tom Wenseleers

colonies. However, much like our own society, they can be plagued by conflicts.

"In wasps, a single mother queen normally performs all the reproduction and her worker offspring do all the labour, like collecting food

and constructing the nest. "Sometimes the workers try to challenge the reproductive monopoly of the queen and reproduce by themselves."

That's one of the bits the lab is most interested in.

"The wasps have a police force which ensures . . . that any egg laid by a worker quickly gets detected and eaten," he explains.

"Studying such such conflicts is not just fun and interesting.

"Eventually, we hope that the insights we gain from it will suggest better ways of suppressing conflicts in our own society."

■ If you've got a tree wasp nest on your premises give the lab a call on 0114 222 0144. There's no charge but they'd appreciate a nice cuppa while they're about it.