

Queensland bees take part in kamikaze death match for hive supremacy, study finds

By Anna Vidot

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PHOTO: The study found the bees fight to the death, in wars sparked by prime real estate. (Supplied: Dr Paul Cunningham)

Game of Thrones fans are familiar with the adage "you win, or you die".

MAP: QLD

Now Queensland researchers have discovered similar behaviour playing out in the backyards of Brisbane, only this time with bees, a so-called "Game of Drones".

It is warfare as brutal as anything you have seen on television.

For years, running battles between different native species of tiny stingless Sugarbag bees have been piling up thousands of casualties right under the noses of people in suburban Brisbane who keep them as pets.

It is only now scientists have been able to reveal what happens when swarms of Sugarbag bees go to war.

Doctor James Hereward from the University of Queensland and Doctor Paul Cunningham from the Queensland University of Technology, lead author of research published today, said it was the first time inter-species warfare in bees was recorded after a study of over 250 hives.

Over the course of months, the researchers watched as a hobby hive went on a war footing.

The bees defending formed a big cloud, and the attackers just flew in, killing each other one by one.

They grab each other in mid-air and fall to the ground in this death grip, and then they both die.

Doctor Paul Cunningham



Because the little bees do not have a sting, the only way of taking another out was with their strong jaws, their mandibles.

"They grab each other in mid-air and fall to the ground in this death grip, and then they both die," Dr Cunningham said.

"So it's just a numbers game of breaking each other down."

The result can be a carpet of thousands of dead and dying bees on the ground locked in mortal combat.

After the first fight, the attackers backed off, regrouped, and returned about a month later with devastating results.

They broke through the defence, workers got into the hive and started dragging the young and the callow out of the hive and just discarding them.

When the third attacking wave came, it was simply too much for the besieged hive to withstand.

The attacking colony just swarmed, throwing out lots of the young adults out of the hive and managed to escort a daughter queen into the hive to rule.

"It was just carnage," Dr Cunningham said.

Dr Cunningham said all that carnage appeared to be about securing the best real estate, but his research raised many questions his team is keen to explore further.

"How these wars come about, what instigates the battle, how the new queen is escorted to the hive," Dr Cunningham said.

"There's many, many questions still to ask."

Topics: animals, animal-science, qld

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PHOTO: The stingless bees latch onto each other mid-air and both eventually die in mortal combat. (Supplied: Dr Paul Cunningham)