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A Game of Hives: Two Australian Bee Species Battle For Months Over Territory

October 22, 2014 | by Lisa Winter



photo credit: QUT

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An international team of ecologists have discovered evidence of a massive Game of Thrones-style war between two species of stingless bees in Brisbane, Australia. These bees battled to the death for months on end, all over possession of a honey-filled hive, in a massacre that would make George R. R. Martin proud. Paul Cunningham of Queensland University of Technology is lead author of the paper published in the journal [The American Naturalist](#).

Tetragonula carbonaria is a species of stingless bee native to Australia. They are commonly regarded as sugarbag bees because of the honey they produce in their hives. While this honey is desired by humans for consumption, it also makes the bees a target for invasion by other colonies who seek to control the vast stores of food. Thousands of raiders will descend upon the hive, ready to fight to the death, usurping the home colony and taking control of the territory. It was initially assumed that these wars would occur between different colonies of the same species, but Cunningham's team found that this was not the case.

"The defending colony was, as we expected, *Tetragonula carbonaria*, but the attacking colony turned out to be a related species originating from further north, called *Tetragonula hockingsi*," co-author James Hereward said in a [press release](#).

A swarm of *hockingsi* worker bees [blitzed](#) the *carbonaria* hive, pulling out bees and

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mercilessly killing them. The ultimate goal of the *hockingsi* bees was to get their own queen in there, therefore taking control of the hive and its honey. Though *carbonaria* and *hockingsi* are both stingless species, they are incredibly formidable fighters due to their strong jaws and unceasing commitment. When opposing bees latch onto one another to fight, they never let go.

"Neither the attacker nor defender survives in these one-on-one death battles, during which a carpet of dead and dying bees can be seen on the ground. It is a sheer numbers game as to who wins," Cunningham added. "It took three consecutive attacks over several weeks before the *hockingsi* bees won out. When they eventually broke through the defenses, they smothered the hive in a huge swarm, mercilessly ejecting the resident workers, drones and young queens. It was carnage!"

Months after the fighting ceased and the bees had settled, the team performed genetic analysis of the bees currently living in the hive. It confirmed that the *hockingsi* colony had successfully overthrown the *carbonaria* bees. The current queen of the hive was a *hockingsi*, a daughter of the queen whose army led the attack.

This melee was not an isolated incident. The team studied 250 hives over the course of five years, finding evidence of 46 separate bee slaughters, though the outcomes were not always predictable.

"And the *hockingsi* bees are not always the winners," Cunningham concluded. "We still have many questions to answer, such as what instigates the attacks, and whether the young in the usurped hive are spared and reared as slaves, or killed outright."

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Nice to read about a group of drones that weren't launched by Obama to watch the middle east.

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14 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



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Look to your sins Queen Carbonaria. For the hive is large and full of honey.

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Sheamus O'Connor · 18 hours ago

We have a hive of these guys at a local school, will have to investigate to see if World War Bee has begun ;)

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



leedogg · 18 hours ago

"stingless" honey bees??? from Australia????? do not believe.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Common Sense → leedogg · 3 hours ago

Yes.. Native bees in Australia are stingless. It's those drop bears you have to worry about ;)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Matthew Joyce → leedogg · 17 hours ago

Anything can happen in Australia. But not literally anything.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Zamiel TheGardener Wilkinson · 19 hours ago

Why couldn't they just Bee friends?

37 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Henrik Ceol Strom → Zamiel TheGardener Wilkinson · 18 hours ago

Hive no idea... Ask Obama I guess.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Peter · 19 hours ago

Can you make one article without relying on some lame and extremely contrived pop-culture reference? We're already reading because we like

science, so, I mean, come on.

34 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Nicolai Egede → Peter · 3 hours ago

There's better places to look if you want completely dry science.

If i remember right the idea with ifls has always been to promote science in pop culture. This is a good idea because stupidity usually occupies a lot of it.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Adam Goodhall → Peter · 8 hours ago

Would you like some help pulling that stick out of your arse?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Mr. AlwaysFair 5000 · 19 hours ago

"All of this while Obama is golfing."

13 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dre Day · 20 hours ago

Come on where's the fricken video?

36 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



moiraesfate · 20 hours ago

Holy crap. Turn it into a tv show.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Kavsar GrammarNazi Kurash · 20 hours ago

THIS NEEDS TO BE A CARTOON! Also i would like a 5-10 hour long HD document of their fighting with epic war music and without any artificial or human noise making.

33 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Momin Imran · 20 hours ago

Obama must intervene.

32 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Gareth Evans → Momin Imran · 20 hours ago

He already did, if the drones are anything to go by.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



hello there → Gareth Evans · 19 hours ago

game of drones

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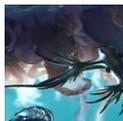
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