

What comes to mind when you picture a bee? Most people imagine the iconic yellow and black stripes or, of course, the honey. But Dr. Don Rolfs, a native bee specialist, is on a mission to change that. Don is a dentist turned insect evangelist with a passion for educating the public about the six hundred plus native bee species in Washington State.

Don got his start as a naturalist in childhood. While he worked globally as dentist, he still maintained an interest in the natural world. After his career in dentistry he returned to eastern Washington and began to assist graduate students. During field research, the number of pollinators he could not identify perplexed him. Upon further investigation, it turned out that little was known about the native pollinators of Washington State. Naturally, he took it upon himself to fill the gap.

Don's work with bees challenges our simplistic views of pollinators in the local ecosystem. In fact, the most recognizable bee of all, the honeybee, is an alien species introduced from Europe and Africa. At his talk at the North Cascades Basecamp for PBI's recently-concluded Conservation Science and Leadership Course, he presented hundreds of perfectly organized and preserved bee specimens. Some of the bees are too small to detect in the field and require a microscope to confirm. Some looked familiar with friendly fuzzy bodies while others gleamed metallic green. Yet they were all native bees. Don's intensive study, which has led to the discovery of a new species, is only the beginning. As he took our test tubes of bees from the field collection day he told us, "I only wish that I had started earlier."

~ Lindsay Warne

