

MY SCENE / NATURE

‘Hotels’ a great place to bee

Karen Retra is all abuzz about these visitors from the insect world checking-in to her East Albury backyard, writes **BEN ROBSON.**

THE bees are in hiding and you can't blame them. It's a cold spring day in East Albury, and the rain is falling like it's the first deluge all over again.

No, the bees are definitely and very sensibly not out and about in Karen Retra's garden, and the only ones to be seen are the ones on Karen's bee-mug by the computer.

It's very quickly obvious that, rain or shine, Karen loves bees.

And it turns out, they love Karen's "bee hotels", designed to attract bees into the garden.

"In practice I've only got a couple of residents," Karen says.

"I'm trying to attract more, but native bees are solitary, unlike honey bees."

In the search for native bees, Karen's garden has been turned into a beacon for bees, which she catalogues and photographs.

"I track all the flowering in my garden," she says.

"And I started recording which plants are of interest to the bees and which ones the native bees are coming to."

"I'm trying to document when I first see them, how many there are and when I stop seeing them and any other behaviour that's interesting."

"I'm also trying to improve my photography — taking photos is not as easy as it might seem with a constantly moving, sometimes not-where-you-expect-it-to-be bee."

And there's nothing she'd love more than to photograph a bee that hasn't been seen in the area for years, or better yet shouldn't be there at all.

"I'd probably describe myself as an enthusiast," Karen says.



"But my partner would probably say it was an obsession."

It all started when Karen first got her honey bees.

"And I was amazed by what these bees were doing," she says.

"I was trying to take photos of them — are they collecting nectar or pollen, what flowers do they visit, what are their different roles?"

"And at the same time I'm a part of the Seed Savers group and we're

really interested in organic gardening, that idea of controlling pests you don't want by encouraging the beneficial insects.

"Putting those two things together I started paying a whole lot more attention to what was in my garden and what they were doing there."

Karen says she had no idea there were at least 1500 and maybe as many as 2000 species of Australian native bees.

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I was trying to take photos of them — are they collecting nectar or pollen, what flowers do they visit, what are their different roles?”

"The more I got into it the more I realised other people didn't really know that either," she says.

"So it does seem a little magic to see something in your garden that you know is in other people's gardens but they're not seeing — that does feel a little special."

Can others take part?

Dr Ken Walker from the Museum of Victoria came to the Border last week and he's running a project at bowerbird.org.au. People can take photos, upload them and have experts identify flora and fauna. For me that idea of citizen science is really exciting, you're contributing to what we know and that's kind of cool.

How many species of native bees would be in Albury-Wodonga?

A national pollinators database suggests about 50 species in our area. I definitely have photos of more than a dozen, which makes me think there's twice that easily in my backyard, and I would love to find out that there's more than 50.

Do you have a favourite?

The blue banded is the charismatic bee — they're easy to see and they're easy to hear, often I'll hear a blue banded bee before I see it. Though they're not the only blue bee that we'll get, they're one of the most common species around here from mid-November onwards. It's hard to go past the blue banded bee but really I'm kind of obsessed with them all — once you start seeing them you want to know more about them especially as there are now ways of having them identified.

How do you keep track of them?

I do blog about bees. I blog about stuff we do here at home but it's turning into a bee blog. I stake out a particular flower if I know they like it, so from now for the next three months I'm trying to watch what comes. Some will be wasps, some will be bees, it's interesting to see who comes and who's interested and what actually makes a nest.

• Visit littlehouseonthehill.square-space.com.

In focus ... Karen Retra in her East Albury backyard with her bee hotels.

Picture: TARA GOONAN