



USC



Native Species Project

Californian nature information & conservation
Newsletter, June 2026

Next hike: June 27, San Gabriel Mts. (subject to change). Email sigurdse@usc.edu

Homely and “heinous” hymenopterans (part deux). While most insects will generally leave you alone if you don’t bother them, some are of course able to sting, and hymenopterans (wasps, bees, ants etc.) are rather notorious in this regard. Here I’m presenting two fascinating species that can give you a real “whopper” sting if you are clumsy. Note that only the females are able to sting (in social hymenopterans, all workers are female).

Tarantula hawk (*Pepsis spp.*). These large, colorful, and solitary wasps are quite striking, with a blue-black body and orange wings. The males have orange antennae. The normal food of the genus is nectar from flowers, but the females hunt large spiders (tarantulas), which they sting and lay their eggs on. The larvae feed on the spider when they hatch. **Fun fact:** The sting of this wasp is frequently listed as one of the most painful of all insect stings. Hardened wilderness experts have been known to lose their faculties when stung, as it can also be temporarily paralyzing to the stung limb. The good news is that they are not at all aggressive; and need to be seriously provoked (e.g. picked up) to sting a person.



Tarantula hawk male, Agoura Hills. Photo: Trond Sigurdson. (A female is shown in the classic illustration, top left).

Rough harvester ant (*Pogonomyrmex rugosus*). These robust ants are also known as desert harvester ants. Look for dark brown ants with bulky heads, living in dry areas, often near deserts. They forage (“harvest”) seeds from plants in their surroundings, and also eat some invertebrates. They dig extensively, thereby also helping to aerate the desert soil. **Fun fact:** drop for drop the harvester ant venom is perhaps the most potent among insects, and similar to very deadly snakes. However, apart from the intense pain of the sting, relatively few serious health effects have been reported. This is because the venom yield is small and the stinger is short.



Rough harvester ant workers in Antelope Valley. Photo: Trond Sigurdson.

Supporting local flora and fauna: Insects are often keystone species in their ecosystems, many being important pollinators and seed dispersers. They are also major constituents of the diets of vertebrates (such as birds). Avoid using pesticides as much as possible, and plant species from the native flora to attract insects to your area.



<https://dornsife.usc.edu/bisc/undergraduate/usc-native-species-project/>

