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THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

WASHINGTON — The nation's capital was abuzz with excitement today when the U.S. Postal Service unveiled four beautiful *Pollination* stamps at the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign (NAPPC) Symposium. The stamps, which will be released next summer, consist of four images arranged in two alternate and interlocking patterns. The intricate design of these beautiful stamps emphasizes the ecological relationship between pollinators and plants and suggests the biodiversity necessary to ensure the viability of that relationship.

"These stamps are a special way to honor the beauty that is in our midst each day," said Yverne Pat Moore, Postmaster, Washington, DC, U.S. Postal Service. "The animals featured on the stamps are beautiful ambassadors of nature."

The goal of the NAPPC Symposium is to increase awareness of the vital role of pollinators and to provide evidence of the critical need for planning and research to prevent further destruction of pollinators. The unveiling followed an exciting, informative morning. A proclamation was issued by Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns declaring National Pollinator Week (June 24-30), and significant new findings from the National Academy of Sciences were presented. For additional information, go to: *www.pollinator.org*.

"Farmers see the connection between plants and pollinators every day. Thanks to these beautiful stamps, that same point is illustrated for everyone," said Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Chick Conner.

Depicted on the Pollination stamps are four wildflowers and four pollinators. Two Morrison's bumble bees are paired with purple or chaparral nightshade (one of the bees is actively engaged in buzz pollination). A calliope hummingbird sips from a hummingbird trumpet blossom. A lesser long-nosed bat prepares to "dive" into a saguaro flower. And a Southern dogface butterfly visits prairie or common ironweed.

Bumble bees with relatively short mouthparts visit flowers that hold nectar in open cups, while those with longer tongues probe for nectar in tubular flowers with hidden nectaries (the plant glands that secrete

nectar). The flowers of some plants, such as tomatoes and other nightshades, contain no nectar but produce an abundance of pollen in tubular anthers. To obtain pollen from these flowers, bumble bees employ a technique known as buzz pollination. By grasping the anthers and rapidly vibrating their flight muscles, they dislodge the pollen.

Butterflies use their long, narrow proboscises like straws to suck up nectar from flowers with long, narrow nectaries. Hummingbirds have long narrow bills and tongues that, along with their ability to hover in mid-air, enable them to obtain nectar from flowers with very deep nectaries. Lesser long-nosed bats feed on the fruit and nectar of night-blooming cacti, such as saguaro, as well as many species of agave.

Pollination, the transfer of pollen within flowers, or from one flower to another of the same species, is the basis for fruit and seed production. Insects and other animals, such as birds and bats, provide pollination services for the majority of the world's food crops and flowering plants. In turn, the plants provide their pollinators with food and other nutrients in the form of energy-producing nectar and protein-rich pollen. Many plants also serve as hosts for the larvae of insect pollinators.

In economic terms, insect-pollinated plants provide us with about one-third of the foods we eat and the beverages we drink. In fact, some plant species—including red clover and other important farm crops—are pollinated only by bumble bees. Many fibers, condiments, spices, oils and medicines also come from animal-pollinated plants. And on a purely aesthetic level, we enjoy the beautiful profusion of colors and lovely fragrances that many flowers use to attract pollinators.

Populations of some animal pollinators appear to be declining. Over the past few decades, scientists and growers (farmers and orchardists, as well as backyard gardeners) have all noted this downward trend. As a result, many concerned organizations and individuals, along with some government agencies, are working to encourage pollinator research, education and awareness. They are also developing conservation and restoration projects aimed at ensuring measurable and documented increases in the numbers and health of both resident and migratory pollinating animals.

Many things can be done to help promote the health and vitality of pollinator populations. Among them are: planting flower gardens that provide a continuous succession of blooms throughout the season, utilize native plants and using nontoxic methods to control pests and weeds. We can also protect nontarget organisms such as pollinators from inadvertent exposure to pesticides, insecticides, herbicides and other chemicals, and set aside and protect habitats suitable for wild pollinators.

Artist Steve Buchanan created an intricate graphic scheme for the stamps that emphasizes the ecological relationship between pollinators and plants and also hints at the biodiversity necessary to ensure the future viability of that relationship. To that end, the four different stamps are arranged in two alternate blocks that fit together like interlocking puzzles. In one block the pollinators form a central starburst. In the other block, the flowers are arranged in the center. Buchanan consulted with a scientific expert before deciding on the pollination partnerships depicted on each of the four stamps.

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