Carpenter bees do not eat wood, they mine it. If you have ever found a perfectly round hole in a soffit board, porch rail, or fascia, about the size of a pencil eraser, you have met their calling card. Left alone, one tidy entrance can mask a gallery that runs 6 to 10 inches, sometimes longer, with branch tunnels added season after season. The damage is cumulative and often out of sight until a board softens, a railing flexes, or a fascia begins to cup. Add the streaks of yellow-brown frass and droppings that stain siding and patios, and what looked like a benign spring visitor can become an annual maintenance headache.

Over the past decade I have inspected dozens of homes that had a carpenter bee presence every spring. The pattern repeats. First year, one or two holes on a south-facing eave. Year two, the same holes reused and extended, with two more beside them. By year three or four, woodpeckers have found the larvae and hammered the area into a ragged mess. Effective carpenter bees control is less about one dramatic treatment and more about timing, access, and understanding their biology.

Know the bee you are dealing with

Carpenter bees are large, often mistaken for bumble bees, but there are differences you can spot from a few feet away. Bumble bees have fuzzy, yellow-and-black abdomens. Carpenter bees have shiny black abdomens with very little hair. Males often hover near nest sites and will bump your hat but cannot sting. Females can sting, though they rarely do unless handled.

In most of the eastern United States, including humid coastal zones and cooler inland areas, adults emerge as early as late March in warm years, more commonly in April. They feed on nectar, then seek bare or weathered wood to excavate starter holes. Softwoods like pine, cedar, and fir are favored, but I have also seen them in redwood and even hardwood trim once the finish has failed. Painted and stained lumber is less attractive but not immune when the coating cracks. Unfinished, sun-baked fascia and cedar shake edges are frequent targets.

The female drills straight in for an inch or so, turns at a right angle, and excavates a gallery along the grain. Inside, she constructs partitioned cells with pollen loaves and lays eggs. In many homes the same entrance is reused and extended, which is why old holes matter. Tunnels can run parallel to each other behind the surface, creating a honeycombed board that looks sound until you probe it.

Why the holes appear in the same places

Wood, sun, and shelter set the stage. The bees prefer dry, unsealed lumber with clear grain. South and west exposures get more sun and thermal gain, making the wood easier to bore in spring. Overhangs and porch ceilings give the bees flight cover from birds and wind. Fascia ends, pergola beams, deck joists that face open air, and exposed rafters all match the profile. If you have an older pergola that has only been oiled once in the last ten years, it is an invitation.

I have also noticed a micro-pattern on many homes. Starter holes cluster within a foot of corners, decorative brackets, or the ends of trim boards. These features break up airflow and create a calmer hover zone. Once one hole is established, other females cue on its presence, which is why intervention in the first season pays dividends.

Damage is not just cosmetic

A single gallery seldom compromises a structural member, but galleries multiply and extend. The trouble escalates when woodpeckers listen for larvae and attack the board to feed on them. I have seen six-foot sections of fascia shredded in a week by a determined downy woodpecker. Stains from frass drip down siding and masonry, leaving tan arcs that resist simple rinsing. On pergolas, exit holes on top surfaces admit water, hastening rot. On porch ceilings, the tunneling can undermine beadboard tongues, and boards begin to sag at the joists.

Insurance adjusters and home inspectors look for clustered holes and bird damage as a sign of deferred maintenance. That is another reason to act early and keep records of your work, whether you do it yourself or hire a professional.

A seasonal plan that actually works

The most reliable carpenter bees control programs are seasonal. They combine inspection, targeted treatments, and surface maintenance. Timing matters. You want to intervene when adults are active and before the next round of eggs is laid. In my own practice I like three windows.

First window, very early spring when daytime highs consistently reach the 60s. Walk the property with a flashlight and mark holes with a wax pencil. Look for new round openings, coarse yellow sawdust beneath, and hovering males. Second window, peak activity in mid to late spring. This is when females are provisioning cells, and you can treat active galleries effectively. Third window, late summer or early fall when new adults emerge, mate, and look for overwinter shelter. Sealing and finishing in this window reduces next spring’s nesting.

How professionals integrate control with other pest needs

Homeowners often ask whether treatments for carpenter bees can be combined with other services such as ant control, termite control, or spider control. The short answer is yes, but you tailor it. Residual insecticides used in bee and wasp control differ in formulation and label instructions from those used for mosquito control or bed bug control. A technician doing rodent control or cricket control may be working in crawlspaces and can inspect joists for bee activity at the same time, but they will not deploy a one-size product.

When you schedule multiple services in a season, sequence them so that surface finishes and carpenter bee treatments do not cancel each other. If you plan to paint fascia, schedule that after dusting and plugging old holes, not before. If you have termite control planned, the drilling and trenching will not affect carpenter bees directly, but the inspection overlaps nicely. The same goes for spider control around eaves, which can reduce prey abundance and slightly lower bee interest, though it is not a primary lever.

What we have learned in the field at Domination Extermination

In one coastal neighborhood with salt air and frequent wind, unpainted cedar pergolas were the number one complaint each April. Our crew at Domination Extermination began keeping a simple log: first sightings, hole counts, and surface condition notes. Over three seasons, properties that received early spring dusting into galleries followed by late-summer sealing saw a greater than 70 percent reduction in new holes the following year. The difference was not exotic chemistry, it was timing and follow-through.

We also learned that some finishes are worth the extra effort. A high-quality exterior paint or a marine-grade spar varnish with UV inhibitors outperformed basic stains. Bees will still start a hole through paint if it is thin or failing, but they are far less likely to choose a board with a robust, intact coating. On older pergolas where homeowners wanted the wood grain to show, we used a penetrating oil with a mildewcide, applied in two coats with proper drying time. That did not eliminate nesting, but it cut it dramatically and made visual inspections easier because new sawdust stood out against the finished surface.

Signs you can trust, and signs that mislead

Fresh sawdust beneath a round hole means active excavation. If you see fine yellow dust on a porch floor or window sill under an eave, it is a live site this week, not last year. Brownish, varnish-like smears below a hole are fecal stains, a sign the gallery is occupied. Males hovering and challenging you near a fascia do not prove that a female is inside that exact hole, but they do tell you the zone is in use.

Not every round hole at an eave is a carpenter bee. Swallow nesting can leave mud pellets and small round cavities, and some wasps reuse old bee entrances. A drilled hole from a previous owner’s cable run can look similar from the ground. Use a flashlight and mirror or a short borescope if needed. If you hear chewing or buzzing inside the wood when you press your ear to the board, you are at the right spot.

Materials and tools that make the job cleaner

Most homeowners do not need an arsenal. For dusting galleries, a hand duster with a narrow tip, a suitable labelled insecticidal dust intended for carpenter bees, a painter’s tool or putty knife, wooden dowels or exterior-grade wood plugs, and paintable exterior caulk will see you through. I also bring blue tape and a wax pencil to mark each treated hole, a small shop vacuum for frass, and safety glasses. If the hole is on a soffit over a porch, a drop cloth saves cleanup time.

A lightweight cordless drill with a set of tapered wood plugs can be useful when holes have been ovalized by woodpeckers. If the finish is stained, have stain on hand for touch-up. On painted surfaces, spot-priming the plug area before painting keeps the patch from flashing.

Step-by-step, without making it a weekend project

Here is a short sequence that has worked on scores of homes. It fits into an hour or two on a typical house, plus drying time for sealants and finish.

- Inspect and mark active holes on a dry day, paying attention to sunlit eaves, pergolas, and rail ends. Note any that show fresh dust or staining.
- Treat each gallery by puffing a small amount of appropriate dust into the entrance. Tap the wood lightly, then add a second light puff to coat interior surfaces. Avoid overapplying, which can cake and reduce spread.
- Wait 24 to 48 hours, then plug the holes. Use tapered wood plugs or short dowels coated with wood glue for a tight fit. For shallow entrances, a paintable exterior caulk works, but solid plugs are better for deeper holes.
- Clean and finish the area. Wipe away frass, spot-prime plugs on painted wood, then paint. On stained wood, apply matching stain to the plug and a thin coat over the area to blend.
- Reduce future interest. Where feasible, apply a high-quality finish to exposed wood in late summer or early fall, focusing on fascia, pergolas, and railings. Replace severely compromised boards instead of layering patches over voids.

That sequence is simple, but the timing between steps is what makes it effective. Treat first, let the dust do its job, then seal. If you plug an active gallery immediately, the bees will simply excavate another hole a few inches away.

What not to do

Foam-expanding sealants seem satisfying because they fill a void, but inside a gallery they trap moisture and decay organisms, and they rarely bond well to the tunnel walls. Cotton balls soaked in household chemicals are another bad idea. They desiccate nearby fibers and leave a scent that can attract other insects. Pouring liquids into holes stains and can run into soffit vents. If you are tempted to swat hovering males with a tennis racket, resist. They are harmless, and your effort is better spent on the galleries where females are laying eggs.

Painting first and treating later is a common misstep. Once you cover the entrance, you cannot dust the interior, and the bees simply start a new opening on that same board. Timing again is the fix.

Integrating carpenter bees control with broader home maintenance

Good carpenter bees control often rides along with other maintenance. When you have a ladder up for gutter cleaning, scan the fascia and mark any holes for treatment. When you schedule a deck wash, include a careful look at beam ends and the upper edges of pergola rafters. When you plan to repaint, build in a day for dusting and plugging before the primer goes on. In attics, while a technician is handling rodent control or installing baffles, they can inspect soffit boards from the inside for daylight leaking through galleries, which helps target exterior repairs.

If your property has repeated wasp issues around eaves, addressing small gaps in trim and applying fresh paint often reduces both wasps and carpenter bee interest. It is not the same as bee and wasp control, but the habitat fix is shared: tight joints, sealed ends, durable finishes.

What Domination Extermination looks for on a first visit

On first-time visits, the Domination Extermination team maps exposure and finish condition before touching a duster. We start at the sunniest elevations and work around, noting every entrance, the age of the hole edges, and any bird damage. We check for signs of other wood-destroying pests to rule out cross-issues. If termite mud tubes are present at the foundation, termite control planning takes priority structurally, and the bee work is staged so that painting and finish repairs do not conflict with termite trenching.

We also ask about past seasons. Did you see hovering in April, or did it start later? Have woodpeckers hit these spots before? Those answers inform when to schedule return visits. Homes with frequent thunderstorms in spring require tighter treatment windows to avoid washing dust out of entrances on exposed faces.

Edge cases: cedar shingles, historic trim, and log homes

Cedar shingle roofs and sidewalls can host carpenter bees, but usually only on edges where the sun dries the wood and wind scuffs the surface. Treating individual shingles is inefficient. Focus on soffits, rake boards, and exposed rafter tails. On historic homes with crown profiles and elaborate brackets, replacing a swiss-cheesed piece is not simple. Here, we predrill slightly oversized channels to accept shaped plugs that match the profile, dust the interior voids thoroughly, and then use a two-part epoxy wood consolidant to restore the face before priming and painting. It is slower, but it preserves the detail.

Log homes present a different math. The volume of exposed wood is enormous, and finishing is labor-intensive. We have had success combining spring gallery dusting with a fall application of a high-solids, breathable exterior log finish. Chinking maintenance plays a role too, since gaps create cozy hover zones under eaves. Expect an annual routine rather than a one-off fix.

Safety and environmental judgment

A measured approach respects pollinators while protecting your structure. Dusting inside galleries targets the pest with minimal off-target impact compared to blanket sprays. It also avoids wetting, which can streak finishes. When flowers are in bloom near working height, keep treatments tight to the wood and avoid broadcast applications. If you have active beekeeping nearby, coordinate timing and products with the keeper.

On ladders, do not reach sideways to get that last hole. Come down, move the ladder, go back up. It takes thirty seconds and saves shoulders and ankles. Eye protection is not optional. Frass falls, and dust puffs back in your face in a light breeze.

When damage suggests replacement, not repair

If a fascia board sounds hollow across more than a third of its length, or if a pergola beam has multiple long galleries and woodpecker chiseling, replacement is more economical than layering treatments and cosmetic patches. Use primed, end-sealed boards for replacements. Before installation, prime all cut edges and the back face. After installation, paint the entire length. End sealing in particular slows moisture uptake and, in my experience, reduces carpenter bee interest on fresh lumber.

On stained structures, removing and flipping a beam is sometimes an option if only the top face is affected. Just do not reinstall it without addressing the original cause, which is usually a thin finish on a high-sun surface.

Pairing controls with other seasonal pests without overdoing it

Spring brings more than carpenter bees. Ant control often ramps up as soil warms, especially for pavement ants along foundations and carpenter ants in wet trim. The presence of carpenter ants in fascia or window trim is a red flag for moisture issues and should be addressed alongside any bee work. Spider control around eaves can be done on the same ladder day, but use restraint in active pollinator zones. Mosquito control is a different system entirely, focused on standing water management and targeted adulticide or larvicide. Bed bug control and cricket control are unrelated to the exterior woodwork, but scheduling those services in the same month is common for property managers. The point is to coordinate, not to conflate.

A professional who understands mosquito control dominationextermination.com the labels and the site will keep applications discrete, spacing treatments by area and need, rather than fogging a property with a generalist blend. It is not only better for the environment, it yields better results.

A homeowner story that captures the cycle

One homeowner with a shaded, two-story porch called us every May for three years running. Each time there were five to eight new holes in the beadboard ceiling, always clustered near a light fixture. The board edges looked fine, but the paint film had lost its gloss. The first year we dusted and plugged, and the holes stopped for that season. The second year, same pattern. By the third call we stepped back. The light fixture leaked heat into the housing, warming the nearby wood. The paint had micro-cracking you could only see at a low angle. We removed the fixture, added an insulated box, repainted that bay with a high-quality exterior enamel, and caulked the trim. The next spring brought one new hole five feet away, which we treated, and then silence. Sometimes the fix is a blend of small building science details and standard bee work.

The payoff of doing it right

A house that had twenty holes one season can have zero the next if you catch it at the right time, dust conscientiously, and follow up with plugs and finish. The difference shows not just in the absence of new holes but in the cleanliness of the eaves and the lack of woodpecker scars. Over a span of years, this kind of maintenance keeps trim straight, gutters seated, and pergolas sound.

Domination Extermination crews are happiest when we return in April for a quick walk-around, find last year’s plugs still tight and the paint unbroken, and do not have to touch a duster. That means the homeowner and the team did the quiet work out of season. It also means the rest of the spring services can focus on what truly needs attention, whether that is a wasp surge at the gable, a new ant trail into the kitchen, or a plan for termite control after a wet winter.

If you want a simple yearly routine

Some homeowners like a calendar. If that is you, put these on it.

- Late March to April: Inspect eaves, pergolas, rail ends. Mark any new holes, dust active galleries, and plan plug work two days later.
- May to June: Spot-check for new dust. Address any stragglers. Schedule other exterior services, such as spider control or wasp nest removal, with care around treated areas.
- Late August to October: Seal and finish exposed wood. Replace compromised boards. Prime cut ends. Touch up paint or stain as needed to keep a continuous, robust film.

You will not eliminate every bee in the zip code. You do not need to. You want your wood to be a less attractive choice than the neighbor’s unsealed pergola or a dead tree in the greenbelt. That is the practical outcome.

A final note from the field

Carpenter bees belong to the seasonal rhythm. They pollinate, they hover like little helicopters, and they make a beeline for softwood that is easy to work. The balance is to respect that role while defending the edges of your house and the structures you have built. Through steady, targeted work and smart finishing, the balance is simple to maintain. Domination Extermination has rolled enough ladders and opened enough galleries to say with confidence that the most elegant solutions are rarely the most complicated. They are the ones done at the right time, in the right place, with a little patience and a good eye for what the wood is telling you.

Domination Extermination
10 Westwood Dr, Mantua Township, NJ 08051
(856) 633-0304