

Bumblebee Aware March 2021

As the new leaves begin to open, the fresh shoots get longer, and the birds sing more loudly, nature brings us a feeling of optimism. Even the colour in all the blossom seems to energise wildlife. Pollinators are out and about, busily collecting food. In the case of bumblebees, a queen will initially gather nectar to store in her nest so that she can feed herself while incubating the first batch of eggs. Once they have hatched, she will forage for pollen to feed the developing larvae. To achieve this, she will need to visit 6,000 flowers every day, a challenge that will be hard to meet unless she is in an area full of suitable flowers. Only when her first brood is old enough to go out and collect food for the colony will she be able to stay in the nest to lay more eggs and co-ordinate the activities.

Flying uses masses of energy. It has been calculated that a jogging human uses up the energy in a Mars bar in an hour, but a bumblebee of a similar size would burn it in 30 seconds of flight. Bumblebee success relies on an adequate supply of flowers growing within 1500 metres of the nest because they cannot fly for more than 40 minutes even on a full tank.

Bumblebees can pollinate plants that honeybees cannot. Some of these like tomatoes, potatoes and strawberries need to have their pollen shaken out of the containers, an action that bumblebees manage by grabbing the flower and buzzing vigorously. These red fruits will form poorly if not pollinated because the size depends on the number of fertilised seeds contained in each one. The furry bumble is much more efficient than less hairy pollinators because it carries so much more pollen from one plant to the next as it forages.

A very active bee that is around now is the **Hairy-footed Flower Bee**. It looks like a bumblebee but is actually a solitary bee that lays its eggs in a tunnel. Each egg is sealed in a cell with its own food package and then abandoned. There is no parental aftercare and there is no colonial life. The queens are black although the males are ginger, but they are easy to spot on Pulmonaria flowers.



If you are looking for suitable, colourful, long-flowering plants for your garden then consider wallflowers, snapdragons, anemones, dahlias, and foxgloves because bees love them. Annuals like cornflower, cosmos, echium, borage, and poppy are valuable too. But avoid the familiar scarlet “**Geraniums**”, petunias, begonias and buzzy lizzies as they are quite useless for bumblebees.