

Bumblebee aware July 2019

Have you seen any cuckoos lately? You may feel inclined to say “No” because the sad fact is that this very special bird is extremely rare in the Maidenhead area. However, there are cuckoo bumblebees in our gardens and they are pollinating our plants.

All but one of the seven common species of bumblebee that we see in our garden has to put up with a clever predator. The cuckoo looks similar to the host bee and has few different



markings but lives a similar life to her host. After she, a queen cuckoo bumblebee, emerges from her Winter hibernation she looks for an established host colony to plunder. She is slightly bigger than her target and has a thicker skin so she has advantages that help her to enter the nest, kill the resident queen and most of the workers and then destroy the eggs and larvae. She then lays her own eggs in the brood cells and leaves them for the host

workers to incubate and feed. Having placed her own progeny in the care of the host she spends her Summer feeding herself on nectar and pollen. This does what the flowers need the bumblebees to do and so her place in the “Grand Scheme” has some justification.

One of the most common is the Southern cuckoo bee. She is a large white-tailed bee with an obvious orange band in front of her wings. The distinguishing feature is a yellow patch on each side of her abdomen where the black meets the white. Being a cuckoo, she does not collect pollen and so has no pollen sac on her hind legs.

It would be a disaster if the cuckoo killed all the host’s eggs, larvae and workers because there would be no host colonies in subsequent years. It seems that less than half of the target nests become taken over because they are quite difficult to find. Furthermore, a cuckoo needs a fairly well established nest with a large enough work-force to rear her youngsters, but not such a big group that could fight her off. The only offspring to survive a takeover are new queen cuckoos and males but the host family is destroyed. She produces no workers.

Curiously enough, the Tree bumblebee which arrived in 2001, has no cuckoo and its numbers have steadily increased since then.

Adrian Doble (1 July 2019) (Member and volunteer with Bumblebee Conservation Trust)

News Flash !

Many people are reporting lots of dead bees on the ground under lime trees. It used to be thought that this was because limes provide plenty of nectar and pollen and, as bees die at some stage anyway, loads are seen under these trees. The latest studies have found a substance in the lime flowers that poisons bumblebees.