

Bumblebee Aware for May - 2021

Is it true that our bumblebees are suffering from Covid? Almost certainly not directly but perhaps they have as a result of the Garden Centres being closed for so many significant weeks, and because gardeners have been spending more time than usual on their allotments and gardens. Flowers may be coming into bloom later than usual and the species being grown may not be the same as in previous years. On top of that, the cold and wet weather will have made it harder for the queens that emerged in March to find enough food to sustain their first batch of larvae.

Although we have seen many hefty queens looking for nest sites and gathering food, the earliest of their workers that go out to forage will be small. Some of these are flying this month. When their sisters join in with the foraging, they are likely to be bigger because they will have had more to eat while developing as larvae.



One of the regular visitors to our gardens is the Garden bumblebee (*Bombus hortorum*). She is one of the black ones with a white tail, but she has three yellow bands on her coat. One is just behind her head, one is just in front of her waist, and the third is just behind her waist. These bands would be so much easier to spot if she would only keep still for a moment, but she is too busy for that! Her tongue is conspicuously long and so is her head. She visits deep flowers like Foxglove, Bluebell, Comfrey and Clover. Numbers of this bee are decreasing because the meadows of Clover that used to be her mainstay have disappeared. The small size of her brood (up to 150 young) makes it even more important for each one to survive if her colony is to continue.

With some of the UK species of bumblebee, the workers and males have a coat pattern that is different from that of the queens but *B. hortorum* keeps life simple. If the bee is carrying pollen, she is a female. If it is carrying no pollen then, it may be a male, or a female gathering nectar only. You can tell which sex it is by looking at its knees!

Some local hedgerows are looking beautiful with **Green alkanet**, White dead nettle and Comfrey. These are all perennials that pollinators love. They grow in woodland, along banks and at the base of hedges. They need no special conditions or care and will look after themselves. If you have a patch of wilder land that you would like to improve for insects (and subsequently hungry birds) than plant some of these.

Your local Garden Centre is a good place to watch bumblebees!



Adrian Doble (Bumblebee Conservation Trust) May 2021