

Bumblebee Aware 2020

The Summer fills our gardens and parks with all manner of flowers in a variety of shapes, some flat like daisies and others with snappy mouths like antirrhinums, or tubular ones like foxgloves. They tend to attract different types of pollinators depending on the shape of their mouths and of their strength. Bees can feed on a range of flowers but they have their preferences and usually stick to one variety until it has been emptied of pollen and/or nectar.

Lime trees are a magnet for bumblebees at the moment and many dead bees will be seen on the ground below them. The science now suggests that lime trees produce a poison that pollinators cannot resist, unfortunately. The only bonus for us is that we can build up a collection of furry corpses to act as a reference. A magnifying glass will help to show the difference between species, and between queens, workers, and males. Identification guides are available on the www.bumblebeeconservation.org.uk website.

This year, more and more residents are reporting bumblebee nests. These have been found in compost heaps, Summer houses, water butt stands, and house walls. One colony even developed in an artificial underground nest placed on the Alleyns Lane allotments. I would love to hear of nests in the area so that I can build up a picture of how the species are doing. Bumblebees are harmless unless the nest is broken into, but a nest will only last until the Autumn when the bees depart for hibernation sites, or die. It is usually possible to work around these valuable squatters for few weeks.

Bombus lucorum, the white-tailed bumble is the star of the month. She has two lemon yellow bands among her black fur, and a clean white tail. The queen forms her colony in an old rodent burrow in March or April and can produce 200 young but all will leave the nest by October. This species is relatively common throughout the UK in gardens and meadows (and Garden Centres). Individuals are not particularly large. Their tongues are short so they tend to feed on knapweeds, brambles, clover, heathers and Vipers bugloss.



Fortunately the cuckoo bee that lives by taking over their nests is not surviving well in the South of the UK.



It always pays to observe and make up your mind about what you see, in spite of what the books say. This snap also shows a white-tailed bee, but on a red hot poker, which is surely a flower with one of the deepest trumpets in the garden! Bumblebees don't read the books and forage on whatever takes their fancy. This was not a rare sight on the allotment.

On a hot day, heat exhaustion may overtake workers but they can often be saved by dissolving a few grains of sugar in a drop of water and placing it in front of them on a saucer, using a toothpick. They often revive in 30 minutes and fly away gratefully, leaving you with a terrific sense of achievement.