

Bumblebee aware June 2019

We are now in the best time of the year to spot bumblebees. The wild flowers that they have evolved to rely on are now blooming throughout the UK and the workers of all species are busy collecting nectar and pollen to feed the developing larvae so the colonies will produce the healthiest of queens with the best chance of surviving the winter.

If you want to make your garden as useful as possible for bumblebees, watch to see which flowers they visit and which ones they ignore. Garden Centres are excellent places to do this because they have a wide range of plants to look at, and of course the visits are free, unlike going to formal places like the National Trust sites which also give the chance to go bee-spotting. Some varieties of a plant seem to be more attractive than others. For example, we have pale blue delphiniums which are rarely visited while the dark mauve ones growing with them are really attractive to the bumbles.

Many plants now carry the "Perfect for pollinators" or "Bee friendly" labels but we are finding that some are completely ignored by all our furry visitors. The answer is to observe before you invest in new plants.

We are now in the middle of summer and the temperatures have already reached comfortable heights although it is not so pleasant if you are doing physical work. Somewhere a bumblebee queen is in her nest incubating her eggs in a shaded part of a local garden but her workers are as busy as ever collecting nectar and pollen. Flying produces a lot of heat and it is not always easy for a bee to keep herself cool enough to avoid damage to the cells that make up her body. On the hottest days she takes a siesta but she needs water to survive as a way of avoiding exhaustion.

Some gardens have a swimming pool or a paddling pool while others contain a pond or a bird bath. You might think that these facilities are perfect for pollinators but this is only true if they can be approached by a shallow slope. In most cases, a bee that drops in for a drink cannot take off and so buzzes around in circles until she drowns.

The answer is simple. Terracotta saucers from Garden Centres come in many sizes and can be made ideal by the addition of a selection of stones chosen to provide islands with sloping sides even when the water level varies. It is also good for birds if placed in suitably sheltered position. A clean log floating in a swimming pool also works well.

Bees that do end up in the pool can often be saved with the help of a tea strainer on the end of a bamboo cane. A soggy bee can be put on a piece of towel roll to help her get dry.

In many cases a groggy bumblebee can be saved with an offering of sugared water. She may just be dangerously exhausted. The First Aid procedure is to place them on a saucer, transfer a drop of water to a spot near her, add a few grains of sugar to it, stir it with a tooth pick and then draw a bead of the solution to the area of the bee's tongue. Don't drown the poor creature or gum up her legs in the process. If you watch carefully you may see her long tongue sweeping the life-saving fluid into her mouth. It often takes less than half an hour for a really weakened bee to recover. In case you are worrying about being stung just remember that bumblebees do not sting and you can even pick them up gently to have a closer look.

Bombus hypnorum - the Tree Bumblebee



The Tree bumblebee only arrived in the UK from mainland Europe in 2001. Since then it has spread steadily as far as Scotland and is now one of the commoner species. At this time of year they are easy to identify on their favourite plants such as blackberry, raspberry, woundwort, and ceanothus. These are all simple flowers that are accessible for a bee with a short tongue. As its name suggests, this species nests and hibernates above ground in trees, nest boxes and under the eaves but also in compost bins if there is one that is suitable. The solo queens emerge in February with the workers appearing 2 months later. By October the frantic work of the colony is over for the year and the newly emerged (and mated) queens begin their long hibernation period alone.

If you have been caught by the bumblebee bug and would like to learn more then you will find these publications useful.

“A guide to bees of Britain” FSC Publications, Unit C1, Stafford Park, Telford, TF3 3BB.

“RSPB Spotlight on Bumblebees” by Richard Comont, from Bloomsbury Natural History, London.

“Bumblebees An introduction” by Nikki Gammans, from The Bumblebee Conservation Trust.

For a huge amount of well-illustrated and free information on this subject, and suggested ways of becoming more involved, visit The Bumblebee Conservation Trust at www.bumblebeeconservation.org

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