



Bumble Bee

Key Facts

- 15 species in Britain
- Only Queens survive winter
- Nests only last for one year

The characteristic buzz of a bumblebee is a common sound during the summer but many species of bumblebees are in decline and two have become extinct in the UK.

The decline is usually blamed on intensive agriculture which uses more chemicals and leads to a loss of habitat and wildflower food sources. However, some species seem to be affected more than others, it is now thought that this might be to do with the length of their tongues! The species with longer tongues have declined more because they like flowers with long tubes of petals such as clovers, vetches, knapweeds and thistles. These are found in traditional hay meadows which have also been declining. This isn't the whole story though, we still need to find out more about bumblebee lifestyles such as where the various species nest and how far they travel from their nests. It may be that the commoner ones are less fussy about their diet which has allowed them to adapt to feeding on garden flowers.

Bumblebees are not aggressive and do not sting unless threatened. A bumblebee colony only has one or two hundred bees unlike wasp or honey bee colonies that can house thousands, so they can't afford to lose members willy nilly. Bumblebee colonies are founded each spring by queens who mated at the end of the previous summer and hibernated under ground over the winter. Workers (unmated females) and males all die off at the end of the summer so the population relies on the queens nesting and raising new workers in the spring. These workers take over the foraging and the queen concentrates on laying. Once the colony is established she will produce male eggs and female ones to be new queens.

There are 15 native species of bumblebee left in Britain, and 6 closely related species of cuckoo bees. The latter look like bumblebees but they are parasites. Female cuckoo bees hijack bumblebee colonies letting the workers raise their eggs for them.

Bumblebees are vital for the pollination of soft fruits, beans and flowers and they are able to pollinate at lower temperatures than other insects. Gardens are an essential source of pollen and nectar and nesting sites. You can help by planting suitable flowers or providing a nest box. However some species rely on habitat such as the traditional meadows at Occombe and can't make the transition to gardens.

Sources: English Nature Leaflet