

## Wildlife of the month – Winter-active bumblebees

### The Buff-tailed bumblebee

For most bumblebee species, winter is a time for hibernation. Queens can be expected to spend about half of their life in hibernation! But for the Buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*), winter can be as busy a time as the rest of the year. In the warmer parts of the UK, fully active winter colonies of this species are regularly recorded, even when temperatures are close to freezing and there is snow on the ground. These plucky bees are feeding upon a few winter-flowering plant species such as Mahonia, Viburnum x bodnantense, Strawberry tree, Snowdrop, Winter honeysuckle, Heather and Rhododendron “Christmas Cheer”.



Buff-tailed bumblebee (left image) has two yellow bands, whereas Garden bumblebee (right image) has three yellow bands.

### Why we need bumblebees

There were 26 species of bumblebee resident in Britain, sadly two species are now extinct.

Bumblebees are great pollinators and have a key role in producing much of the food that we eat. Through the pollination of many commercial crops such as tomatoes, peas, apples and strawberries, insects are estimated to contribute over £600 million per annum to the UK economy (2015).

Bumblebees also help pollinate many wildflowers, allowing them to reproduce. Without this pollination many of these plants would not produce seeds, resulting in declines in both abundance and distribution for a range of species. These plants are the basis of complex food chains, so other wildlife such as other insects, birds and mammals would all suffer if bees disappeared.

### A bumblebee's diet

The best way to help bumblebees and other pollinating insects is to grow plenty of bee-friendly flowers, especially during bumblebee season (between March and October). Pollen and nectar contain all of the essential nutrients bumblebees need, as well as providing protein for growth and carbohydrates for energy.

Bee species vary in the length of their tongues, and this affects the flower types that they prefer. Bumblebees with short tongues favour: rhododendron, cotoneaster, lavender, heather, comfrey, sedum, knapweed, bellflower and chives.

Garden plants that long-tongued species prefer include comfrey, catmint, raspberry, rhododendron, foxglove, delphinium, dahlia, and honeysuckle.

It is also important to provide flowers throughout the season, to accommodate the life cycles of bumble bees and other pollinators. Bumble bees need food for the queen bees in spring when they

are founding the nest, throughout the summer for the workers to rear the young, and finally at the end of the season for the young queens to build up fat stores before hibernating for the winter.

**Other good plants for bees include** wallflowers, comfrey, lungwort, fruit trees, wild marjoram, borage, vipers bugloss, musk mallow, hyssop, scabious, heleniums, veronicas and teucrums. Dandelion and white deadnettle, though often considered as weeds, are also very useful.

**References:**

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Bumblebee Conservation Trust

Woodland Trust

BBC

On **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> February** at Risby Village Hall, 10am to 12pm, we are running a **Wildlife Friendly Village Workshop: Bees**. We will be talking about how we can plant bee friendly plants and create bee habitats in our gardens. Please come along if you are interested. There will be free tea, coffee and cake!