

BUMBLEBEES

Bumblebees are among our most charismatic insects and many gardeners are keen to encourage them into their gardens – but they can be difficult to identify. This is compounded by the different castes (queens, workers and males), age, and natural variability. Of the 24 species found in the UK, only a small handful are found regularly in gardens. By focusing on these more common species, we can begin to learn how to identify these fascinating animals.

When spotting a bumblebee in your garden, the first thing to do is note the tail colour, which narrows down the species it could be. It is also worth looking at the shape of the face, and other colours on the bee. You could take photographs from a few different angles to help; this will allow you to continue identifying it later.

If you have bumblebees in your garden that you can't identify as a particular species, you can still add them to your Garden BirdWatch counts. You can select different types of unidentified bee,



including black with red tail, brown, black and yellow with white tail, or black and yellow with red tail, instead of a full species. Simply record the highest count of each type you see at any time like you would with any other GBW species. If you have photos, send them to us and we can help you identify your garden bumblebees.

COMMON CARDER BEE

Common Carder is the carder bee most likely to be encountered in your garden. These bumblebees are ginger all over, with paler white-grey colouring on the side of the thorax. Be aware of faded individuals in late summer, which can appear very grey, but their small stature should help narrow them down to this species.



RED-TAILED BUMBLEBEE

Queens are very distinctive. They are quite large and are the only common garden species to be entirely black with a red tail. Workers are smaller but share the same colour pattern. Males are similar to male Early Bumblebees but can be distinguished by their more extensive brighter red tail, and longer body shape.

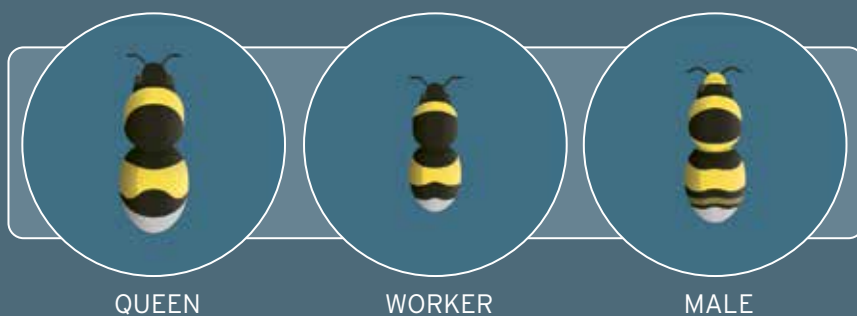


EARLY BUMBLEBEE

Early Bumblebees are small and, as the name suggests, establish colonies early in the year. Males are similar to male Red-tailed Bumblebees, but are generally smaller, with more yellow on the head and abdomen, and have just a small orange tip to the tail.



Illustrations by Josh Gowen / joshgowen.com



WHITE-TAILED BUMBLEBEE

Queens and workers have two bright lemon yellow stripes and a pure white tail, while the males have much more yellow, including yellow on their heads. The lemon yellow stripes combined with clean white tails help to separate them from Buff-tailed Bumblebees, which have more golden or orange tones in their yellow stripes.



BUFF-TAILED BUMBLEBEE

One of our largest species. All castes are similar in markings to the White-tailed but the stripes are more golden in colour. Queens have warmer tones on the tail, but the workers can be very similar with white tails. Looking closely at the face can help to identify these bees; Buff-tailed have a short wide face, whereas White-tailed Bumblebees have a longer face.



TREE BUMBLEBEE

Easily identified by the ginger thorax and white tail; a unique combination among our bumblebees. The large queens are often seen in March and April. If you discover a bumblebee nest in your house or in a nest box, it will likely be this species.



GARDEN BUMBLEBEE

This species has the longest face and tongue of the commoner UK species. Garden Bumblebees can often be found visiting deep flowers including Foxgloves. All castes have a yellow midriff, with yellow hairs on both the thorax and abdomen.

CUCKOO BUMBLEBEES

Whereas most bumblebee species are social, with workers helping the queen to produce new offspring, some species have a different strategy – parasitising social bumblebee colonies. These species, known as ‘cuckoos’, lay their eggs in the nest of others (like cuckoo birds), shifting parental duties to the nest host. Queens and workers of social bumblebees collect protein-rich pollen to help young bees develop, but as cuckoo bumblebees don’t need to do this, they lack pollen baskets on the hind legs. Pollen baskets are smooth, concave areas bordered by long stiff hairs. Though their colour markings usually resemble that of their host species, you may be able to identify a cuckoo bumblebee by their darker wings, sparser body hairs and shorter hairs on the hind legs.

