

Parts of a bumblebee

# identifying bumblebees



Head  
Thorax  
Abdomen

According to bumblebee enthusiast **Julia Pigott**, "The great thing about watching bees is that we all have them in our gardens; grow some of their favourite flowers and they arrive." Here she explains how we can learn to identify these important pollinators.

In the UK there are about 250 species of bee, and numerous insects that mimic them in appearance and behaviour, so it's hard to know where to start if you want to identify them.

There are three different types of bee: bumblebees, solitary bees and one species of honeybee. There are true bumblebees and cuckoo bumblebees; cuckoos lay

their eggs in host bumblebee nests and they look similar to their hosts. True bumblebees are furry, rather rounded and often colourful; they tend to be larger than solitary and honeybees. Although there are 24 bumblebee species in the UK, sadly there are only seven common ones. By learning these you can recognise many of the bees you see, and you can then begin to identify others when you realise you're looking at something a bit different.

Once you get your eye in, just the behaviour and habitat of the insect will give you useful clues. Get close enough to get a good look, take a photograph, or catch them in a glass tube and study them with a hand lens. Divide them into groups and have a methodical plan to follow. First of all, decide whether you're looking at a bee or a wasp or a fly. Here are some generalised rules and a plan to follow:

## What is it?

*Jizz* the overall look and behaviour 'at a glance' eg busy (female bee), slower (male bee or cuckoo bee).

### Flower shape

- ❖ Dish shaped flower = bee with short face and tongue.
- ❖ Tube-shaped flower = bee with long face and tongue.

### Habitat and time of year



▲ Long tongued bee in tube flower, white tail so this has to be *Bombus hortorum*

### More information

• **Identification online** [www.bumblebeeconservation.org/about-bees/identification](http://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/about-bees/identification) • **Glass tubes from Watkin & Doncaster** [www.watdon.co.uk](http://www.watdon.co.uk)  
 • **How to catch your bee** [www.beeed.org.uk/Bee ID Days.html](http://www.beeed.org.uk/Bee ID Days.html) • The best starter book **Field Guide to the Bumblebees of Great Britain & Ireland** by Mike Edwards & Martin Jenner ISBN: 9780954971311 costs about £12.00

## Bees & wasps

- ❖ Long or short face
- ❖ Eyes closely wrapped around face

### Four wings

## Bee

- ❖ Furry
- ❖ Legs wider/flatter

- ❖ Pollen basket on legs (female)



▲ Bumblebee

## Wasp

- ❖ Smooth, few hairs
- ❖ Legs slim

- ❖ No pollen on legs



▲ Wasp

## Flies

- ❖ Stubby face
- ❖ Big eyes 'stuck on'

### Two wings

- ❖ Variable hair/fur
- ❖ Legs very slim

- ❖ No pollen on legs



▲ Hoverfly

# True bumblebee or cuckoo bumblebee?



## True bumblebee

- ❖ Clear wings
- ❖ Face may be long
- ❖ Fur dense
- ❖ Female: shiny tibia rear leg
- ❖ Female: pollen basket rear leg

## Cuckoo bumblebee

- ❖ Dark wings
- ❖ Short round face
- ❖ Fur sparser or bald areas
- ❖ Hairy rounded tibia rear leg
- ❖ No clumps of pollen on legs



# True bumblebee: male or female (queen or worker)



## Female

- ❖ Queen relatively large, workers smaller
- ❖ Rear leg: shiny flat tibia with pollen basket

## Male

- ❖ Smaller than the queen
- ❖ Rear leg: hairy flat tibia May have yellow fur on face
- ❖ Longer antennae, curved



# What colour is it?

## Female queen and workers

## True bumblebees

## Male (if different from female)



Common species: (*Bombus pascuorum*) the carder bee

### 1. The browns

- ❖ Ginger-brown all over



Common species: (*Bombus lapidarius*) the red tailed bee

### 2. The black bodied red tails

- ❖ Red tail, thorax black

▶ Male has yellow face and yellow collar on thorax



Common species: (*Bombus pratorum*) the early bee

### 3. Banded red tails

- ❖ Orange tail, yellow collar on thorax & yellow band on abdomen

▶ Small bee with a short face. Male has yellow face



Common species: (*Bombus terrestris*) the buff tailed bee

### 4. Two banded white tails ▶ Male has yellow face

- ❖ *Bombus terrestris*: Off-white or buff tail, egg-yolk yellow collar on thorax, egg-yolk yellow band on abdomen

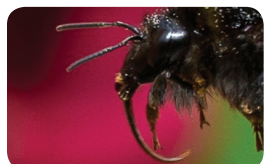
- ❖ *Bombus lucorum*: Pure white tail, lemon-yellow collar on thorax, lemon-yellow band on abdomen



Common species: (*Bombus lucorum*) the white tailed bee

### 5. Three banded white tails

- ❖ White tail, yellow collar on thorax, yellow band on rear of thorax Yellow band on abdomen



Common species: (*Bombus hortorum*) the garden bee

### 6. New comer

- ❖ White tail, chestnut-brown thorax with bald black 'rucksack' area



Common species: (*Bombus hypnorum*) the tree bee