

5. Bumblebees and Other Bees, Wasps and Ants



This sheet gives information about bees, wasps and ants, our partnership to promote them and guidelines on how to manage a burial site to benefit them.

The bumblebee is a flagship group of Caring for God's Acre.

Bumblebees need help as they have declined in the UK due to a general loss of flowers in our landscape. Burial sites usually have the three things needed by bumblebees to survive – food, shelter and nest sites.



We are working with the Bumblebee Conservation Trust to encourage bumblebees in burial grounds.

KNOW YOUR BUMBLEBEES

Bumblebees are larger and hairier than other bees, making them well suited for our climate. They are social insects and live in nests of up to 400 individuals, ruled by a queen. Unlike honeybees they do not swarm, do

not become aggressive (although the queen can sting) and a nest only lasts for one year.

The life cycle of a bumblebee

In early spring the queen emerges from hibernation to feed on pollen and nectar from early flowering plants. She searches for a dry cavity on or below ground such as a vole hole or the base of a tussock of coarse grass. She makes a nest.

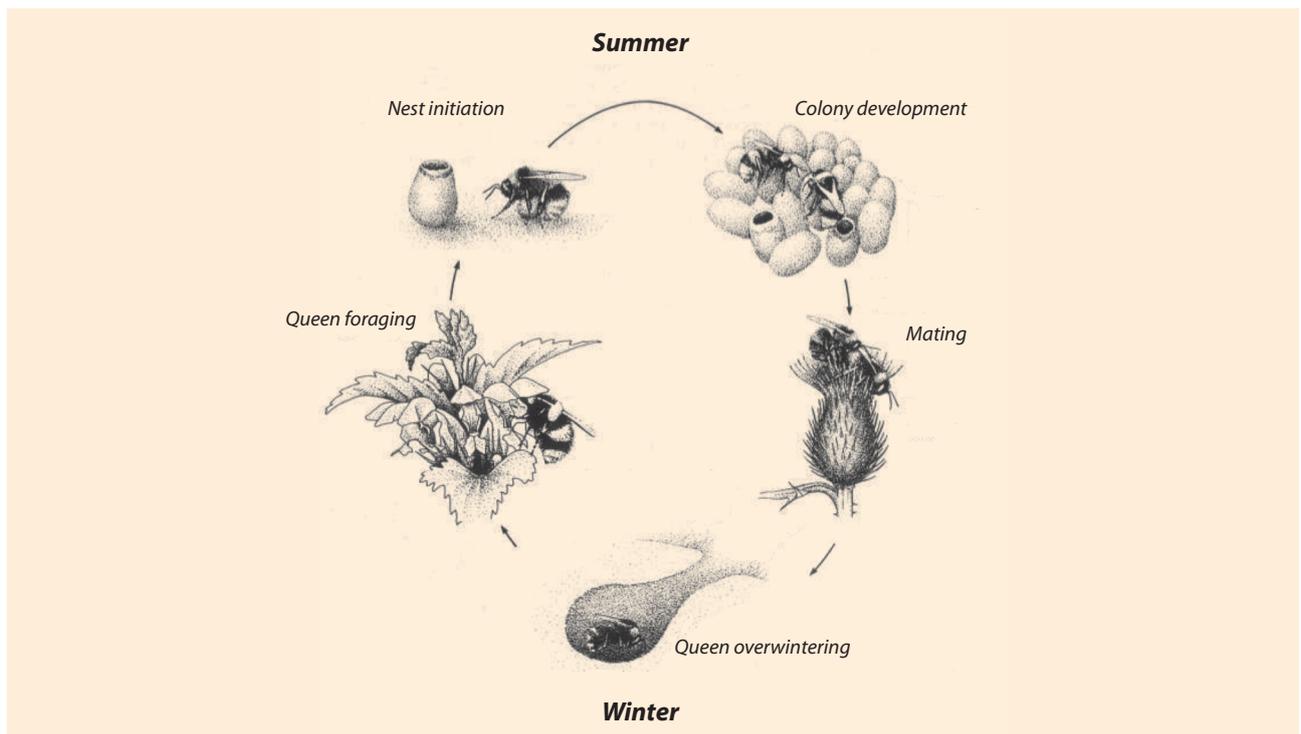
A ball of pollen in a thimble sized waxen honey pot is filled with nectar and eggs laid in it and the summer life cycle commences.

Bumblebees are essential for pollinating our plants. They are also active in colder weather – the first bee you see in spring and the last in autumn is likely to be a bumblebee.

There are 24 species of bumblebee native to Britain, 8 of which are widespread. They can be identified fairly easily with a book or a chart. Take a look on the Bumblebee Conservation Trust website or the Field Studies Council fold-out chart on bees.



Cowslip



5. Bumblebees and Other Bees, Wasps and Ants

KNOW YOUR OTHER BEES, WASPS AND ANTS

There are over 250 species of bee in total in the UK and 90% of these are solitary bees.

Solitary bees do not nest together but are found in small holes, cracks and crevices, often in areas of bare soil. Check stone walls; they may well contain mason bees, as may old snail shells! Like bumblebees and honeybees they are important pollinators.

Wasps can be social or solitary

Social wasps tend to make nests from wood fibres which are chewed and made into a sort of paper.

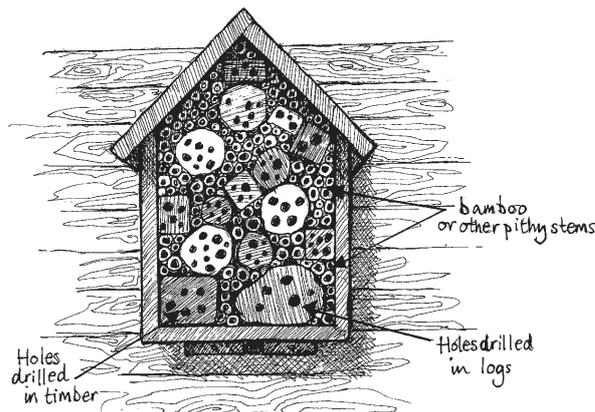
Solitary wasps have a variety of nesting habits including making mud cells on twigs or walls or using small holes. Wasps tend to be parasitic, laying eggs into the body of a host, often another insect species. Wasps are important for controlling the numbers of the host species, many of which are potential pests.

Ants are scavengers on insects and carrion. They are also food for a variety of other animals. Ants live communally and some species create ant hills which are frequently found in old, undisturbed grassland such as burial grounds. Ant hills are made by the harmless yellow meadow ant.

Ant hills

These can be very old and up to a metre high. They are a sign of old, undisturbed grassland. The part above ground is the tip of the colony with a series of galleries extending below ground. These galleries are maintained by specialist worker ants which fill them with aphids. The aphids feed on plant roots. The worker ants then 'milk' the aphids of their honeydew.

Ant hills are warm with loose soil and have particular plants growing on them. They are good feeding sites for birds and other animals. Green woodpeckers feed mainly on ants.



HELPING BUMBLEBEES, BEES, WASPS AND ANTS

Bees and wasps often suffer from mistaken identity. Very few species cause a nuisance but they all look fairly similar.

If you have a problem with wasps then seek advice in identifying them correctly before you take action.

Food and shelter

- Leave areas of long and tussocky grassland. This thick grass, along with mouse and vole holes, can become nest sites for bumblebees.
- Provide a variety of flowers producing nectar through the year. Ideally these will be native wildflowers.
- Undisturbed compost heaps and log piles provide nest and hibernation sites for bumblebees.
- Make a bee hotel! (see sheet A8, Helping Wildlife). Bundles of hollow stems in a sunny spot provide sites for solitary bees.
- Protect any ant hills from damage. They need to be in full sun so keep clear of shade from trees, brambles or shrubs.
- If a mound really has to be moved then do so in the winter when the ants are below ground. If a whole nest has to be moved then relocate it to a sunny spot in late August.

Useful contacts

Bumblebee Conservation Trust, www.bumblebeeconservation.org

Buglife, www.buglife.org.uk

Useful reading

Guide to Bees of Britain – Field Studies Council fold-out chart



Yellow Meadow Ant