

The plight of the bumblebee

In summers past, Britain was swathed in flower-filled hay and clover meadows which provided plentiful food for our native bees. After the Second World War (WW2), the demand for cheap food saw an end to traditional farming as chemicals were applied to fields, removing the wildflowers and leaving only fast growing grasses. The production of hay declined as farmers turned to silage for winter feed and fields were cut much earlier in the season. Since WW2, we have lost 97% of our flower rich grasslands and the impact on wildlife, including many of our native British bumblebees, has been devastating.



Photo credit: Northscape Photography www.northscapephotography.com

Helping bees in summer: Create a flowering meadow



From a corner of a lawn to a farm field we can create a meadow, providing food for bumblebees and lots of other wildlife too! Basic tips include:

- No addition of artificial fertilisers or chemicals.
 - Allow the grass to grow in summer (even if it is not flowery to begin with, you will probably have more than you expect!).
 - Cut in late summer or early autumn and remove all the cuttings (this reduces the fertility of the soil, encouraging wildflowers to grow amongst the grass). Winter grazing by livestock also helps (if you have some!).
 - A spring or autumn sowing with a native wildflower seed mix can boost the process
- (prepare ground by mowing and raking first). Typical species include birds-foot trefoil, red clover, knapweed, vetch and yellow rattle. All great food plants for bees.
- Management of plants like docks and nettles may be required.



Did you know?

Buff-tailed bumblebees can fly over a kilometer from the nest to find food.

Understanding how far different species can fly and increasing the amount of flowers in our countryside accordingly, is critical to bumblebee conservation.



Practical ideas for meadows

Make your own hay

Winter feed or bedding for animals and pets!

- Ensure you know the species in your meadow to avoid harmful plants.
- Cut towards the end of summer when most flowers have set seed.
- Rake into rows and turn hay during a few warm days to ensure it is completely dry
- If you are unable to bale the hay, pack it in paper feed bags and store undercover.

Carry out a bumblebee survey

Survey your meadow to find out about visiting bumblebees! Once each month, in spring and summer, survey your meadow for a fixed time and with the same number of people. For example, 10 people surveying for 30 minutes. Count the number of bumblebees spotted.

- Is there a peak month? Does this remain the same each year as your meadow becomes more established?
- Can you record the flowers which the bees are visiting? Do they seem to have a favourite?
- Do you have another habitat you could survey, for example a vegetable garden? Try and survey comparable size areas on the same day and compare your results. Which habitat do bumblebees favour?

Think of some questions you'd like to investigate – how would you do it?



Bumblebees
Big & hairy



Honey bees
Shiny black & orange



Solitary bees
Smaller & less hairy



Hoverflies
Big eyes & short antennae

Photo credits: Clare Flynn



You will need to know your bumblebees from your honeybees and hoverflies – for lots of great information on spotting bumblebees, visit: bumblebeeconservation.org



All activities should be carried out with standard **Health and Safety and Risk Assessment** procedures. Children should not carry out any of these activities without responsible adult supervision and some activities using tools may be unsuitable for younger children.

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