

The Plight of the Bumble Bee

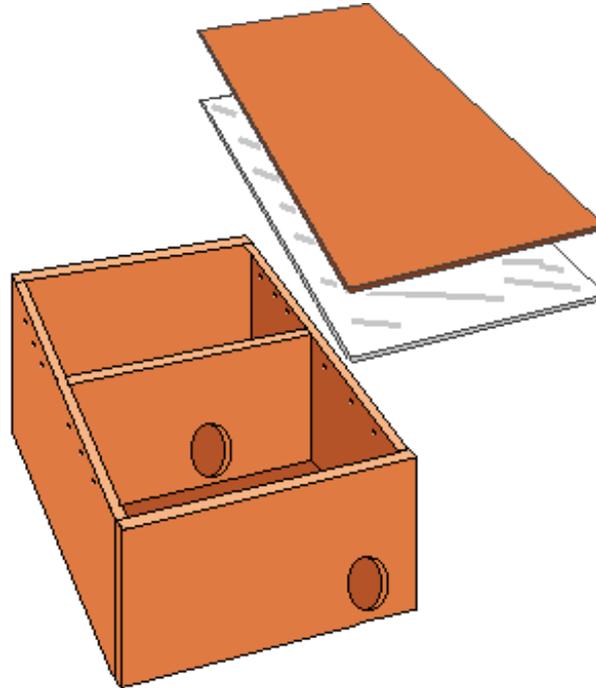
Bumble bees are among many peoples favourite insects, but in recent years, like much of our wildlife, they've suffered from the changes in the countryside. Most of our ancient meadows have disappeared and the wild plants which flowered in them each year were a vital food source for our bees. When the plants went, sadly some of our bee species became extinct too.

While we might not mourn the loss of insects as we would if say the tiger or the elephant became extinct, but we'd certainly miss the food they help produce. Around ninety per cent of crops depend on insect pollination for their success, and around eighty per cent of those crops are pollinated by bees. They're nature's most important pollinators.

There are twenty five species in Britain: 14 are true bumble bees which nest in old mouse holes; 5 are carder bees which nest on the surface of grassy mounds and the other six are cuckoo bees, so called because they are parasitic, living in the nests of bumble and carder bees. Only six of the species are still common. Most are rare or on the brink of extinction.



Buff-Tailed Bumble Bee



A Bumble Bee House

Drink Problems

One of the main differences between Bumble bee species is the shape of the mouthparts. Some have long tongues and some have short tongues. It's the long tongued bees which are most at risk, as they need to drink from deep, tubular flowers, like red clover, which are now scarce. They find it difficult to drink from open flowers. It's like trying to drink soup from a shallow bowl using an ice cream sundae spoon - not easy. If you have space, one way you can help them is to plant native wild flowers like red clover.

Bee Homes

Another factor in their decline is the number of available nest sites in spring. Again, this is an area where you can help by

providing an artificial nesting site.

The wooden box shown here is a typical example. Just about any kind of small wooden box will do, as long as it has a smooth entrance hole on one side near the bottom. The hole should be 15 to 20mms in diameter. The size of the box is not critical - 30cms long x 20cms wide x 15cms deep is fine. This one has two compartments, the rear one being the nesting area, but you could just have one compartment.

You can fit a hinged or a

detachable roof. We've also put a glass panel in the top to enable viewing of the nest without disturbing the bees too much. Make sure the lid overhangs the sides to keep the rain out, and drill a few holes on each side of the box, near the top, to allow condensation to escape. To prevent predators disturbing the box you could place a large rock on top of the lid.

Bees will be more attracted to your box if you provide nesting material. Put in some dry moss, or if you know someone with a pet mouse/hamster, some old bedding material would be ideal. Avoid cotton wool as bees can get tangled in it.

Location Location

You can place the box anywhere a queen bumble bee would naturally search for a nest-site, such as along the bottom of a hedge or fence. Choose a warm, dry, sheltered place, preferably south-facing but make sure it's protected from direct sunlight. If you site the box against a tree (not a pine) or building it will aid the bee's orientation.

Further Info

Find out more about bumble bees and receive a free nature newsletter at: www.uksafari.com

BUMBLE BEE FACTS

- There are 25 species of bumble bee in the U.K.
- Their hairy bodies pick up more pollen than any other insect
- A bumble bee nest can contain up to 200 bees
- All bumble bees die off in winter except for the fertilised queen who hibernates and starts a new colony in spring