

Spotter's guide – early bumblebee



Queen



Worker



Male

Quick facts

Scientific name: *Bombus pratorum*

Habitat

Urban and rural areas across the UK, but absent from the Western and Northern Scottish Isles.

Often associated with green spaces that have flowering plants.

Nesting places

Underground in small mammal burrows, tree holes and bird boxes.

Behaviour

Active during the day, with a peak in activity during sunny weather above 14°C.

Females are seen flying from March to August, males from May to August.

Appearance

A small bumblebee with yellow and black bands and an orange tail.

Queens are smaller than other bumblebee queens, and are the only common bumblebee to have yellow banding and an orange tail.

Flower preference

Open flowers such as white clover, lavender and sage because of the bumblebee's short tongue. Flowers of blackthorn, raspberry and bramble are also popular.

The early bumblebee can be confused with other bumblebees, as it is one of three species in the UK that has a red or orange tail. There are bands of colour that are commonly found on different parts of a bumblebee's body that will help you with identification.

Bees have three different segments to their body, and the placement of the bands of colour on these segments will help to determine which species they are:

- The **head**
- The **thorax** (middle)
- The **abdomen** (rear segment that includes the tail)

Early bumblebee

Queen



Vital statistics:

- 15 – 17 mm
- Yellow colour on the front of the thorax
- Yellow colour on the first part of the abdomen
- Distinctive orange tail

Queens are bigger than males and workers.

Worker



Vital statistics:

- 10 – 14 mm
- Yellow colour on the front of the thorax
- Distinctive orange tail

Worker early bumblebees lack the yellow banding on the abdomen that is seen in both queens and males.

Male



Vital statistics:

- 11 – 13 mm
- Yellow colour on the front of the thorax but sometimes the whole thorax
- Yellow colour on the first part of the abdomen
- Distinctive orange tail

Males are smaller than the queens and can have much more yellow on their thorax.

Other types of bumblebee

Bilberry bumblebee



Queen

Worker

Male

Vital statistics:

Size

- Queen: 15 mm
- Worker: 10 mm
- Male: 10 mm

Colour

- Yellow collar
- Red-orange abdomen which has more extensive colouring than the early bumblebee

Behaviour

- Flies from April to October
- Nests underground, using old mammal burrows
- Found mostly on heath and moorland habitats

Red-tailed bumblebee



Queen

Worker

Male

Vital statistics:

Size

- Queen: 17 mm
- Worker: 12 mm
- Male: 12 mm

Colour

- Black body
- Orange-red tail
- Yellow collar and bar on the males
- No visible yellow on abdomen

Behaviour

- Flies from March to October
- Nests underground, or low down in stone walls

Identifying pollinator groups

Bumblebees



- Two pairs of wings
- Larger than solitary and honey bees
- Furry and stout-looking
- Tails are usually orange, red, white or brown
- Pollen baskets on the back legs (apart from cuckoo bumblebees, which do not collect pollen)

Honey bees



- Two pairs of wings
- Usually smaller and slimmer than bumblebees
- Long antennae
- Pollen baskets on the back legs
- Colour can vary from orange and banded (slightly wasp like) to mostly black

Solitary bees



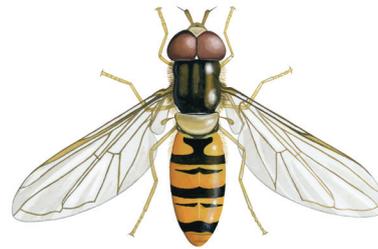
- Two pairs of wings
- Hairs on the back legs or underneath the abdomen to collect pollen, but they do not form a basket like on other bees
- Non-aggressive and do not swarm
- Males do not have a sting

Wasps

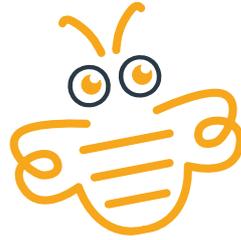


- Obvious 'pinched' waist between thorax and abdomen
- Social wasps have bold bright yellow-and-black banded colouring, with yellow markings on the legs and face
- Solitary wasps can vary in colour from yellow and black banded, to black or red and metallic

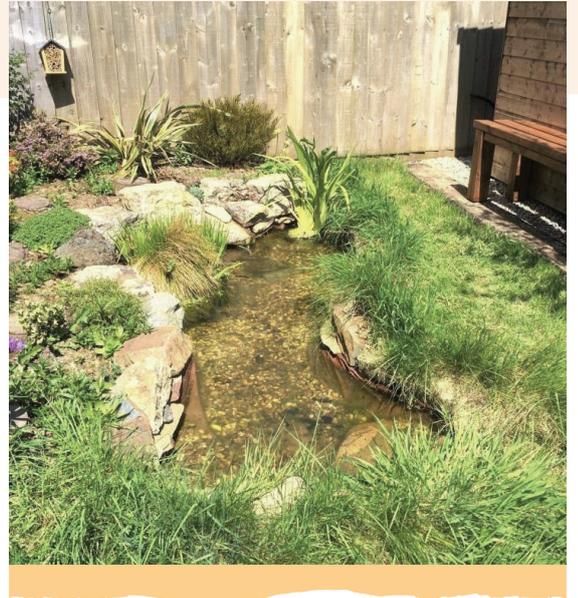
Hoverflies



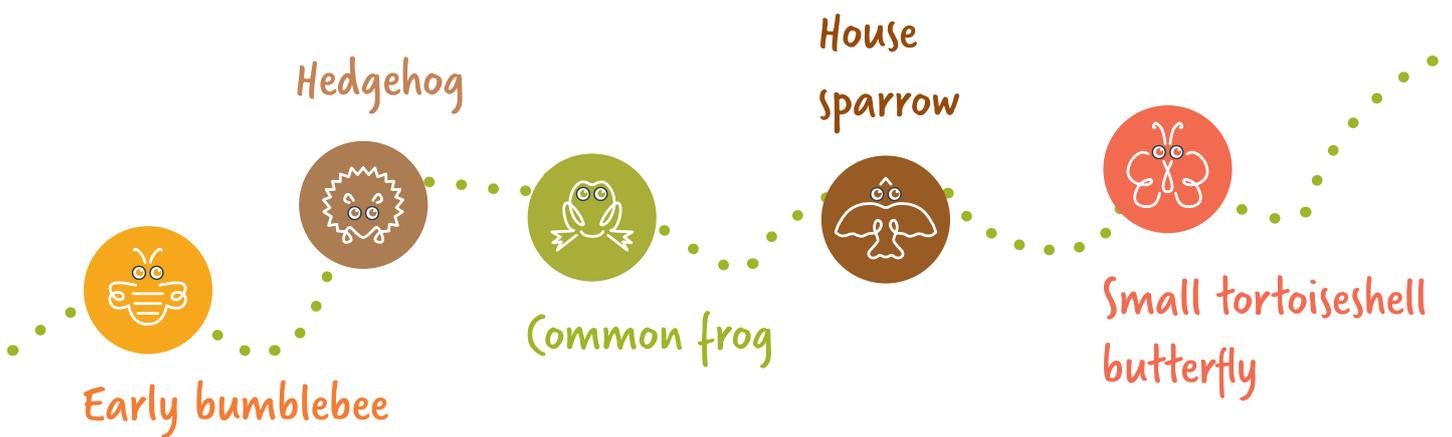
- Short antennae in comparison to bees and wasps
- One pair of wings
- May hover close to flowers
- Bold colouring can be similar to wasps, but hoverflies have a less pinched waist
- Large eyes that can cover almost the whole head



Naturehood



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Illustrations supplied by Chris Shields