

A simple guide to insects that can be mistaken for bumblebees



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Cuckoo bees are specialised bumblebees. They invade true bumblebee nests. Cuckoo bees look very like true bumblebees, but they are less hairy, more shiny and have a softer buzz. They don't have pollen baskets on their back legs, and are unlikely to be seen flying in and out of nests as regular traffic.



Honeybees are smaller and thinner than bumblebees, less hairy, have pointed bottoms and look a bit like wasps, only they are brownish rather than black and yellow. Beekeepers keep them for honey, and they live in very large perennial colonies (30,000 individuals). You will see honeybees feeding on flowers, but they are unlikely to nest in your garden. If they do, there will be thousands of bees flying around. You will only see a few bees going in and out of a bumblebee nest.

There are over 200 species of **solitary bee**, some of which nest in small burrows in the ground or soft mortar in brickwork, while others nest in hollow plant stems. Most solitary bees are small and not very noticeable, but they are sometimes locally abundant.



There are some species of **hoverfly** and some other hairy flies (called **bee flies**) that look quite like bumblebees, and which also feed on flowers. They are distinguishable by their small or feathered antennae. You won't see them flying from holes in the ground, so they won't be confused with bumblebee traffic.

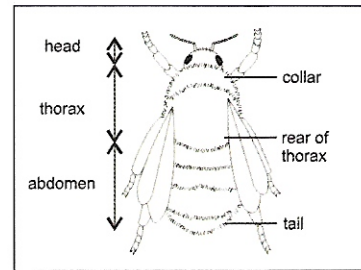


Like bumblebees, **wasps** live as annual colonies in nests that may well be in similar places to bumblebee nests, with traffic going steadily in and out. However, wasps look quite different. They are bright yellow and black, they are smooth and shiny rather than hairy, they have a distinct "wasp waist", and a sharply pointed bottom.

A good general insect guide, such as "Insects of Britain and Western Europe" by Michael Chinery, Harper Collins Publishers, ISBN 000 219917-7, will clearly show the differences between bumblebees and other insect groups.

A simple guide to UK BUMBLEBEE COLOUR GROUPS

All common (and most rare) bumblebee species in the UK can be placed into one of five groups based on their colour patterns. To allocate a bumblebee to one of these groups, look at its thorax and abdomen. Bumblebee workers are variable in size even within species, but they are smaller than queens which (in most species) they otherwise resemble. These diagrams are approximately twice life size.



The 'Tree Bumblebee'

Bombus hypnorum

A recent addition to the UK fauna, this bee is not shown in the chart, but is now increasingly common throughout England. Unique colour pattern.



Bombus hypnorum

Red / Brown Thorax
Charcoal Abdomen
White Tail

Group I - Browns

Thorax not black. Bee gingery-brown overall. Males and workers similar.

Common species: *Bombus pascuorum*

Group II Black-bodied red tails

Thorax black, tail red. Males have yellow face and yellow band on thorax.

Common species: *Bombus lapidarius*

Group III Banded red tails

Thorax black with yellow collar, may be yellow band on abdomen as well. If yellow face, it's a male. Orange or red tail.

Common species: *Bombus pratorum*

Group IV Two-banded white tails

Thorax black with yellow collar, yellow band on abdomen. White tail. Face wider than it is long. If yellow face, it's a male.

Common species: *Bombus terrestris*
Bombus lucorum

Group V Three-banded white tails

Thorax black with yellow collar, another yellow band at rear of thorax. Yellow band on abdomen, white tail. Face longer than it is wide.

Males and workers similar.

Common species: *Bombus hortorum*

Workers

Males shown below if different from workers

