Bumblebee Aware July 2020

Anyone who walks past a Lavender bush these days will get the impression that the bumblebees are panic buying. It is a very busy time because they are collecting us much pollen and nectar as they can to maximise the eventual number of individuals in their colonies, and the size of the new queens when they hatch. Hollyhock, Cornflower, Snapdragon and Scabious are also very popular this month. You may notice that different bee species concentrate on different flowers.

The queen bee that created this year's family is now spending all her time in the nest laying eggs and producing the airborne hormones that coordinate the activities around her. She makes sure that all the eggs laid at the beginning of the season grow into female workers who will then collect food, tend to the larvae, do the house-keeping, and defend the nest. Later she will produce males that will leave the nest before the final brood, young queens, takes flight. Nests that fail to develop enough workers, because of insufficient floral resources, will not produce any new queens.

It is in the interest of the colony to produce workers of different sizes because big foragers are beneficial at collecting loads and flying the distance whereas small workers have advantages within the cramped nest space. Males are only good for breeding and so it is a waste of food to grow large ones. On the contrary, the larger the new queens that are produced, the better. This helps them to build a large internal fat store to help them to survive hibernation, to develop eggs, to resist parasites, and to create a healthy new colony the following year.

Bombus pratorum is the Early bumblebee. The picture shows a male, because he has a striking furry yellow face, however the females look similar but with black faces. Otherwise they are all black apart from a yellow band on the thorax, another on the abdomen, and an orange tail. It is a small species with a short tongue and so it favours open flowers such as brambles and Cotoneaster but relies on White dead nettle and Comfrey in the Spring. The queen emerges from hibernation in March and creates a colony of up to 100 individuals in an underground nest. Typically the colony will die out before September. Despite these factors, the species is common throughout the UK and active now.

Rather than being mere observers of struggling wildlife, we can add to the environment by supplying abundant floral food at the crucial times of the year. In the Spring we can help emerging queens, in the Summer we can promote maximum colony growth, and in the Autumn we can help to stock up new queens. Because of our warmer Winters, some bees do not hibernate even though there are very few flowers available at that time and they rely on our Winter-flowering shrubs for their survival. They can cope with low temperatures as long as they have enough food.

Adrian Doble (Bumblebee Conservation Trust) July 2020