

## **A Bumblebee identification walk, Stanton Hall Gardens with bee expert Shaun Hackett.**

On Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 6 members of the Group travelled down to Stanton Hall Gardens, 5 miles NW of Morpeth, for a walk and talk about bumblebees.



There we met Shaun Hackett of Northumberland National Park Ranger who explained that although he was not a bee expert his job surveying and managing meadows had sparked an interest in bumblebees and had led to him becoming the foremost expert in the Parks organisation.

Shaun started by giving us a brief description of the 6 most common bees to be seen in gardens in our area. They are the :-

- Buff-tailed bumblebee *Bombus terrestris*
- Common carder bumblebee *Bombus pascuorum*
- Early bumblebee *Bombus pratorum*
- Garden bumblebee *Bombus hortorum*
- Red-tailed bumblebee *Bombus lapidarius*
- White-tailed bumblebee *Bombus lucorum*

To see a guide by Fiona goto <http://Berwick Wildlife Group\Website\BumbleBeeCrib.html>

He then gave us an overview of the typical lifecycle of these bees. That the large Queen emerges from hibernation between March and May depending upon species. Her first task is to feed up on pollen and nectar before finding a suitable nest site for her new colony. Often she uses an old mouse or vole nest.

Over the next two or three weeks she makes a large pollen lump and on this lays her first eggs. These hatch out into worker bees which are all females but much smaller than the Queen. Their role is to look after the Queen, the nest and to forage for food for the colony. You can always tell workers by the pollen basket on their back legs. Subsequent broods of workers are larger due to the greater supply of food.

Later in the year, around July, the Queen produces more queens and male bumblebees. These males do no work and are not allowed to return to the nest. They spend the nights out on plants and flowers and can be easily spotted, and photographed, early in the morning when their bodies are still too cool to fly. After mating with the new queens all males die in late summer or early autumn.

Essentially at this time the old Queen and all her workers die too.

The new queens after feeding up on pollen and nectar search out sheltered places to hibernate through the coming winter, before emerging again to start new colonies.

Shaun then led us on a walk around the beautiful gardens at Stanton Hall where he managed to find all 6 species for us to see.

A few other fact that he told us.

That all bumblebees have stings but very rarely use them, and it is a fallacy that they die if they use their sting.

The workers take between  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour to fill their pollen baskets.

There are 22 species of bumblebee in Britain, and 6 species of cuckoo bumblebee. Cuckoos search out a colony after the queen has layed her workers, then attacks and kills the queen and takes over the colony. She is then looked after by the existing workers. Cuckoo bumblebees never produce workers, just females and males.

That poppies do not release their pollen easily, and to get the pollen the bee lies on it's back vibrating violently to release the pollen.

And finally how not to become stressed trying to identify bumblebees, just go away, sit down quietly and have a cup of tea!

John, July 08