

Identifying honeybees, bumble bees and wasps



Honey Bee



Bumble Bee



Wasp

It is important to understand that no insect species in the UK will attack a human being except in self-defence. To help you identify whether the insect you have encountered is a wasp, bee or bumble bee, here is some useful information.

WASPS are very important to ecology, playing a vital role in limiting the populations of thousands of other insect species. All female wasps can defend themselves and their nests by using their stinger to inject venom. Males do not have a sting. Wasps are markedly different from honeybees and bumble bees, with bright yellow bands on their abdomens and a noticeable “wasp waist.”

Unless a wasp nest is in a dangerous position, it is best left alone; the first frost will kill it. Whilst there are products which can destroy a nest by spraying the entrance, it is advisable to let a professional Pest Control Officer with the proper protective clothing and equipment deal with a wasp's nest. Look up “Pest and Vermin Control” and seek professional advice. Note that beekeepers do not have access to the necessary sprays to deal with wasps.

Honeybees are important pollinators and produce honey. The abdomen is usually striped with dark brown bands and they may have some hairs on the thorax between the wings. A honeybee will die if it uses its sting. Swarming is the natural way that honeybees increase their numbers. If you find a swarm, leave it alone and ask your local Council Pest Control Officer to put you in touch with a local beekeeper or Association. The beekeeper will remove the swarm if possible. Only qualified beekeepers are permitted to give an order to destroy bees. Honeybees are a protected species.

Bumble bees are also pollinators but do not produce honey. They seldom sting unless highly provoked and will warn first by raising a leg. They are easily recognisable: larger than honeybees with fur all over the body. Depending on the species, they usually have distinctly coloured tails (mostly white or orange). They are also a protected species and so colonies must not be destroyed: damaging a colony can lead to a heavy fine. Nests usually number just a few hundred bumble bees and they are generally located in places which make them difficult to remove but bear in mind they are generally harmless. All bumble bee colonies die out at the end of summer, the queen hibernating until the next year.

If your garden, house or outbuildings offer the right accommodation, then you may be blessed with **solitary bees**, of which there are over 200 UK species, in all sizes, shapes and colours. The two most noticed are mortar and mining bees, which look similar to honey bees but are usually lightly haired. Adult mining and mortar bees only live for a short time each year normally from April-July and are often confused with wasps in the early spring. However, they are not aggressive and all are good pollinators.