

‘Swarm Calls’ that Turn Out to be Bumblebees

Have you had a phone call — from someone with no bee knowledge, but a bee problem? They are out of their depth, their safety is challenged ... but they are also intrigued. You are a beekeeper; your role is to understand their situation, give advice and perhaps practical help. Your questions lead to understanding, then discussion and advice. By helping, you interact with people and get great satisfaction. Your association enhances its reputation, its public profile and perhaps even gains a donation.

When is a bee a bumblebee?

Beekeepers get ‘help calls’ about many types of insect. It starts in spring with calls about solitary bees, moves on via bumblebees to honey bee swarms, then wasps — from August until the frosts. So, how will you know this call concerns bumblebees?

It helps greatly if the caller can email you a photograph, but time of year is the first pointer; bumblebee calls are usually from April to June. Other inputs are the colours, shape, furriness, sound and behaviour of the bees. The nature and amount (numbers/frequency) of flight activity is important and where this happens. With bumblebees, expect only a few in/out flights per ten minutes, often less; dramatically less than honey bees. The exception is *Bombus hypnorum*, the tree bumblebee, fairly new in the UK, where it is common for a little cloud of drone bees to fly around close to the nest all day, for days on end. They will be the subject of an article in June BBKA News.

Bumblebee queens are about from early spring. Once ready they ‘nest search’ for somewhere snug to use as home; often an old mouse nest. Colonies start with just the queen, but only a few queens will be successful and start a nest. It can be two months before there is enough flight activity for people to notice anything. Bumblebees are enterprising creatures. The activity might be at a hole in the ground, or in a compost heap where they wriggle under surface material, in or under a shed, in a bird-box, up at house roof level or in an air-brick. They can also land, then walk to a nest in a shed or garage.

Although often similar, there are major differences between bumblebees and honey bees. Colony numbers vary with the species, but by summer and with a prolific species, there will only be 400 bumblebees ... tiny numbers compared to honey bees! Colonies die out after three to six months. Queens can sometimes choose to re-use a ‘nest area’ in later seasons, but there is little knowledge about this behaviour. Within a colony bumblebees vary significantly in size, and can also vary in colour pattern. You can find out much more about this at the Bumblebee Conservation Trust’s (BBCT) website: www.bumblebeeconservation.org

Solutions for SOS calls

Assuming your caller’s situation is caused by bumblebees — what do you do? Firstly, sound envious; try to persuade them to let the bees stay put and to enjoy their new role as landlord. Say something like: ‘You are so lucky! Do enjoy watching them come and go!’

In almost all cases there should be no need to interfere with a bumblebee colony. My exceptions to this would be:

- When small children could be at risk.
- To resolve a domestic crisis.
- To save the colony from construction work.
- A *B. hypnorum* colony in a bird box fixed on a surface liable to vibration (e.g. sheds). The vibration upsets the bumblebees and can cause them to sting people. A colony in a box not subject to vibration should be no trouble.

In general bumblebees are significantly less defensive than honey bees, but if you start trying to interfere with a nest expect a hostile reception. Their stings are unbarred so you get a smaller dose of venom, but otherwise it is like a bee sting. Bees lying on their backs with their legs in air, are waiting to grab then sting you!

How to move a bumblebee colony safely

If it is necessary to move a colony, do this gently at night. Work with red light from a rear cycle light, or put some red plastic film over a torch. Bumblebees cannot see red, so will be unable to fly or evade gentle capture if the intensity of the light is not too bright. Bees that do not come with the nest can be captured individually in small pots, like a 35mm film tub, then tipped into the box. You need to work quickly!



A queen Tree Bumblebee, *Bombus hypnorum*, feeds on nectar from a female Pussy Willow catkin. Photo: Clive Hill.

The ideal for the bees would be to find a shoe box or something similar. Put dry grass or dry moss in the bottom of the box to support the nest. Make a 2cm hole in the end and block it with tape, or some kind of bung. Wearing your bee gear and gloves, pick up the nest and pop it in the box. Collect and add any lost bees, top up with extra moss, then shut the lid tightly; they can get out of tiny gaps! Try to keep the nest upright, otherwise their honey pots will spill. Take the nest about two miles away and put it somewhere sheltered, out of direct sunlight and with a board or something rainproof over the top. The two miles is to prevent foraging bees getting confused and returning to the original nest site. Once you have moved them and the bees

have settled down, remove the tape/bung. The bees might take a little while to adjust, but should take to their new home. Expect a few bees back at the original location; these will be ones you missed or foragers that camped out overnight, only to find their colony gone the following morning. An alternative approach, for bees nesting in, or close to the ground is to re-position their flight entrance using a tube put into a more suitable position, but do remember to do this at night.

You can find further details on moving colonies in the ‘About BBCT’ ‘Contact us’ section of the BBCT website. Re-homed colonies are an excellent educational tool: see my article in BBKA News 169 February 2008.



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