

# Wild meadows and bumblebees



Photos: The National Trust and Bumblebee Conservation Trust

*Wildflower meadow  
and shrill carder bee*

The bumblebee is an icon of a countryside rich in wildflower meadows, heather-clad commons, bluebell woods and blossoming hedgerows. However, bumblebees have greatly declined – matched by the loss of wildflower habitats upon which they depend. Quick action is needed to restore bumblebee habitat, especially wildflower grasslands, if these declines are to be reversed.

## About bumblebees

Two out of the 24 species of Britain's bumblebees have disappeared from the British countryside in recent decades, while the majority of other species have declined and the populations of at least six species are of significant conservation concern. Bumblebee declines across Europe are strongly linked to the loss of wildflower-rich habitats, especially hay meadows and other wildflower grasslands. These have disappeared owing to modern farming methods and the abandonment of traditional grassland and woodland management. Whilst bumblebees depend on wildflower-rich habitats, they also support them, by pollinating the flowers as they forage for pollen and nectar. At least 19 bumblebee species are found in Wales, including five of Britain's six rarest species. Three of the remaining six British populations of the very rare shrill carder bee are in south Wales.



Bumblebees need food plants to provide nectar and pollen between early spring and autumn, they also need some areas of undisturbed tussocky grassland, such as the bottom of hedgerows, for nesting in. Foraging and nesting areas need to be unaffected by pesticides or other activities that could harm bees or wild flowers.

### Meadow flowers for bumblebees

Bumblebees need flowers from the date the queens emerge in early spring and until they hibernate in the autumn. The following species are particularly good for bumblebees:

Spring:	bugle
Early summer:	yellow rattle, red clover, ragged robin (w), self-heal
Mid-late summer:	bird's-foot trefoil, common knapweed, marsh thistle (w), tufted vetch, water mint (w)
Late summer:	devil's-bit scabious

(w): wet grasslands



Common knapweed

Photo: Peter Creed



Yellow rattle

Photo: Marion Rayner

*Common knapweed, red clover and yellow rattle are useful meadow flowers for bumblebees*

Existing wild meadows will normally contain some of these species in abundance. Species-poor meadows can be enhanced using local native seed or plug plants; advice on seed origin and suppliers is available from *Flora locale*. Most plants of wild meadows are perennials and re-grow each year, although some species such as yellow rattle and eyebright are annuals, and regenerate each year from seed.

### Managing wildflower grasslands for bumblebees

**Hay meadows:** take hay between mid-July and August (leaving the meadow ungrazed from mid-late spring). Lightly graze in autumn to remove the aftermath grass growth. To provide a refuge and late-summer forage for bumblebees, leave a two-metre uncut margin along at least one edge of the field. Dry sites can also be grazed until early or mid April – this will suppress grass and encourage the wild flowers. Delay the hay-cut to late summer once every five years to provide late forage.

**Pastures** should be lightly and carefully grazed, ideally by cattle or ponies, ensuring there are always plenty of wild flowers. Insufficient cutting or grazing will allow coarse grasses to increase and the quantity of wild flowers will decline. Grazing sheep on flower-rich pastures during the summer months should be avoided as they will selectively graze out the flower heads, even at very low numbers, and substantially reduce the value of the grassland for bumblebees and other pollinators.

**Hedgerows** should only be cut in rotation every other year to ensure that there are always some that will produce abundant blossom (and berries for birds). If possible manage them less frequently and leave undisturbed from March to September when birds and bees are nesting.

### Creating new bumblebee habitat

Plant nectar and pollen-rich plants in gardens and consider creating new areas of wildflower grassland, however small. Further advice is available from *Flora locale* and the Bumblebee Conservation Trust.

### Further sources of information

#### Managing and restoring wildflower grasslands

The following advisory notes are available from *Flora locale*:

- ✿ *Restoring wildflower grasslands in Wales;*
- ✿ *Sowing native flora;*
- ✿ *Enhancing semi-improved grasslands;*
- ✿ *Managing recently created grasslands;*
- ✿ *Buying native flora;*
- ✿ *Discover Welsh wild plants;*
- ✿ *Paddocks for ponies and biodiversity; and*
- ✿ *Grazing for wild plants and biodiversity.*

#### Bumblebee conservation and habitat management, restoration and creation

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#### Hedgerow management

[www.hedgeline.org.uk](http://www.hedgeline.org.uk)



*Flora locale* seeks to restore wild plants and wild-plant communities to lands and landscapes across the UK, and by this means raise the biodiversity, environmental quality and enjoyment of town and countryside

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