



Shetland
Amenity
Trust



Bumblebees



Bombus muscorum © Rory Tallack

Bumblebees are well-known and popular insects. They are larger, more rotund, and more colourful than honeybees. They are also more friendly than honeybees, and will only sting to defend themselves, so if you don't touch or scare them, they will stay quite calm. As well as their colour, they are conspicuous by their deep buzzing sound; the scientific name of the 'true' bumblebees, *Bombus*, means 'booming'.

Shetland Biological Records Centre is keen to find out more about Shetland's bumblebees. You can help us by submitting your sightings records or by completing a survey of the bees in your garden or along a regular walking route once a week, or as often as you can.

How to Identify Bumblebees in Shetland

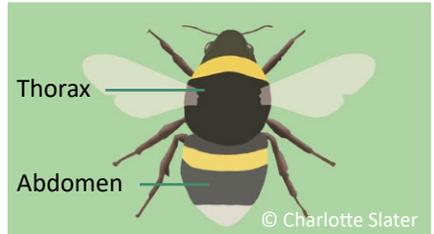
First of all, *is* it a bumblebee? The honeybee is not known to occur naturally in Shetland, although there are several hives kept on Mainland. A more likely source of potential confusion are certain hoverflies, which can look extremely similar to bumblebees. Hoverflies, being true flies, have only one pair of wings attached to the thorax, whereas bumblebees have two pairs, although the hind wings are often 'zipped' to the forewings in a row of hooks. Hoverflies, as their names suggests tend to hover in one place, and are typically smaller and less noisy than bumblebees.

Northern White-tailed Bumblebee

Bombus magnus

This is a common visitor to gardens and crofting land throughout Shetland. It is one of the earliest species to appear in Shetland along with the Buff-tailed Bumblebee and can be seen anytime between April and September.

The Northern White-tail is a very neat, clean-looking species. It has a black thorax, with a single yellow band at the front. The abdomen has another yellow band, and a white tail; hence this is Shetland's only 'double banded white-tail'.



Small Heath Bumblebee

Bombus jonellus

The subspecies *vogti* is endemic to Shetland. It is a scarce species, closely associated with heather moorland, and is most frequently seen in July and August (when heather is flowering). It has a black thorax, with yellow bands at the front and back. There is a third yellow band on the abdomen, adjacent to the thorax, and a whitish or buff tail.

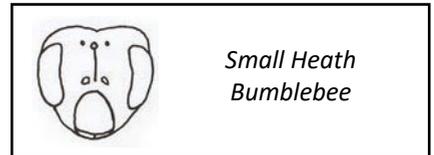
This is one of two species of 'triple-banded white-tail' in Shetland. However, Small Heath Bumblebee has a short face, roughly only as long as it is wide (see diagram).



Garden Bumblebee

Bombus hortorum

Another scarce bumblebee in Shetland, almost always found around gardens or crops between June and August, but more widespread than the previous species. Garden Bumblebee is another 'triple-banded white-tail', very similar to the previous species, apart from where it is found (in gardens rather than on hills) it is best told by its longer face (see diagram).



*Small Heath
Bumblebee*



*Garden
Bumblebee*

face shape of Small Heath compared to the Garden Bumblebee

Buff-tailed Bumblebee

Bombus terrestris

First discovered in Shetland in 2012, it appears that Buff-tailed Bumblebee is now well established throughout the whole of Shetland. The queens are first to appear in the Spring and are easily recognised by their buff or buffy-white 'tails'. Males and workers are very similar to *B. magnus* and can be difficult to tell apart.



'Shetland' Bumblebee

Bombus muscorum

A common species found in a variety of habitats but mostly associated with meadows and roadside verges. They can be found throughout Shetland between May and October. The Shetland subspecies *agricolae* is also found in the Outer Hebrides. The Shetland Bumblebee is very distinctive, having a thorax that is completely orange, which can be seen easily in flight as well as at rest, contrasting with a wholly yellow abdomen, although on worn examples some blackish can show through from the body.



Great Yellow Bumblebee

Bombus distinguendus

This species is presumed extinct in Shetland, with no sightings in the past 75 years. It is a rare and declining species throughout the UK, but does occur in Orkney. The Great Yellow Bumblebee has an abdomen which is brownish-yellow all over (i.e. without a distinct yellow band at the front), while the thorax is similarly brownish-yellow (rather than yellow), with a black or grey band between the wings. Any sighting in Shetland would be very welcome and ideally supported with a photograph.



Early Bumblebee

Bombus pratorum

First seen in 2018, but so far only recorded in Lerwick and Bressay. It is very distinctive due to the orange 'tail' tip. If it colonises successfully, we might expect it to be the first species that we see in spring in years to come.



Bumblebees are not just a colourful part of our insect fauna, they are important pollinators of certain plant species and, in Shetland, may be a useful indicator of habitat quality. For example, the Small Heath Bumblebee favours better quality moorland, where the heather flowers more freely. The Shetland Bumblebee also requires high densities of flowers to maintain a healthy population so it is seriously affected by overgrazing and reseeding. The best way to attract bumblebees to your garden is therefore to plant lots of flowers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some bumblebees have declined in Shetland over recent decades, presumably as a result of changing agricultural practices. Whilst others, the Early and Buff-tailed Bumblebee, have extended their range north in the UK presumably in response to global warming. SBRC would like to know much more about the distribution and abundance of Shetland's bumblebees today, so that we have better baseline data against which to monitor future changes.

To be of value a record needs a date, location (with a grid reference – many free apps are available for phones that will do this) a species name and the observer's name. Photographs are welcomed as they can be helpful in confirming the identification.

If you have the time, you could also take part in a regular bumblebee survey, recording the bumblebee species you see in the same area every week (or as often as you are able). This area could be your garden or a set walking route that you take regularly. Try and complete your survey on a sunny day when bees are most active. If you walk a regular route then a map showing this or grid references at the start and finish point would be useful as would details of the habitats along the route (farmland, roadside verge, heather moorland, garden).

Records should be submitted to SBRC by email to:

paul.harvey@shetlandamenity.org.

This project is supported by:



Shetland Biological Records Centre, Shetland Amenity Trust, Garthspool, Lerwick, ZE1 0NY