

Information Sheet

WINTER-ACTIVE BUMBLEBEES

- * Activity noted throughout the winter
- * Regularly observed in gardens in towns and cities
- * May be associated with climate change
- * **CAN YOU add to our knowledge?**



BWARS

Stuart Roberts

Featuring:

- Background information
- Flower visitation
- Habitat and observations

Winter activity

Winter activity in bumblebees is a recent phenomenon in the UK. The behaviour was first recognised in the late 1990's when worker bumblebees of the common *Bombus terrestris* were observed in a number of sites in southern England foraging for pollen in the winter months of December and January.

It is believed that some of the summer generation of queens establish nests in October, and these start producing workers in early to mid-ovember. Pollen foraging workers may be active throughout the winter and a new generation of queens and males emerges in February.

Flower visitation

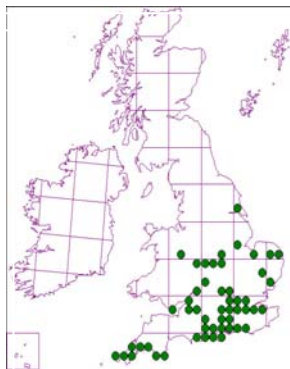
For bumbles to visit flowers in winter there must be a rich source of pollen and/or nectar available. Foremost among forage plants are *Mahonia*, various winter-flowering heathers, honeysuckles and *Rhododendron*.

Habitat and observations

Virtually every record of winter bumblebee activity has come from towns and cities in England, from Hull southwards (although records from north of Leicester and Birmingham are unusual).

Key places for looking for bumbles in winter are town and city gardens, parks, car-parks and various amenity shrubberies. Garden centres are also important for bees. Activity is most usual on warm sunny days, but at a time of year when good days are at a premium, activity can also be observed in overcast and damp conditions, and even when there is snow on the ground.

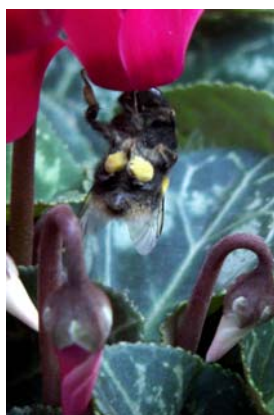
All records (with photos if possible) should be sent to BWARS recorders (see below for details).



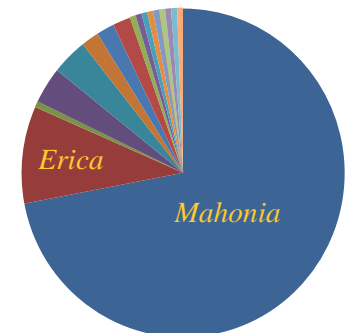
Map showing location of sightings of winter-active bumblebees



A worker of *Bombus terrestris* foraging at flowers of *Mahonia*
Photo copyright Karen Nichols



A worker of *Bombus terrestris* foraging at flowers of *Cyclamen* at Clapham Market. Photo copyright Holly Gramazio



Flower visitation chart showing the importance of *Mahonia* flowers to winter-active bumblebee workers. Nearly 75% of all flower visitation is recorded from *Mahonia*, and significant numbers also from winter-flowering Heathers, (*Erica* spp.), *Lonicera* and *Rhododendron*

For details of Tom Ings' research visit <http://webSPACE.qmul.ac.uk/tcings/>

Hymettus Ltd is the premier source of advice on the conservation of bees, wasps and ants within Great Britain and Ireland.

<http://hymettus.org.uk/>

BWARS, The Bees Wasps & Ants Recording Society is the national recording scheme which provides the only source of fully validated data on the UK bee, wasp & ant fauna.

<http://www.bwars.com/>

For further information and submission of records/photographs

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