

INFORMATION SHEET

An Environmental Protection Team Service

Bees

Honey Bee *Apis mellifera* (L)

These are easily distinguished from wasps, being finely banded in orange and on the abdomen, with a furry brown thorax not black and shiny as wasps. The brown and furry strong hind legs (compared with the yellow, shiny and slender wasp legs) often carry balls of yellow pollen. Bees do not fold their wings when at rest and the "wasp waist" is less obvious. Whilst bees can successfully sting humans, they have a barbed sting which they find impossible to remove from tough skin and would only sting under extreme provocation. The chemical composition of bee venom differs from that of the wasp. They are always found as colonies; individuals cannot live long alone.

Perhaps 20,000 honeybees may arrive in flight and cluster on a tree branch, for example. The noise can be alarming but the danger is not great. Just stay out of their way and contact a local beekeeper or your local Environmental Health Department or the Police or the Swarm Liaison Officer of the Beekeepers' Association (01789) 731745, who will know someone who will come and collect the swarm.

Honey bees convert the nectar from flowers to honey to provide food for the colony to survive the winter. They benefit the environment by their ability to pollinate a wide range of flowers and crops. They produce honey of course, but they are also the only source of beeswax.

Solitary Bee *Andrena* spp. There are several families of bees which are solitary by nature but the commonest group belongs to the genus *Andrena* and are frequently called mining bees. They closely resemble the honey bee, although the individual species differ in colouration. One of the best known species is the **tawny mining bee**, *Andrena fulva*, which has the thorax and abdomen richly covered in dark tan coloured fur. Each individual female bee will make a nest in a suitable position in the ground and it frequently happens that sandy domestic lawns are a suitable site. There may be many individual nests grouped closely together, taking advantage of the ease of excavation of the light soil. They sometimes cause a minor nuisance until they disappear in mid-summer. They cannot successfully sting humans.

Mason Bee *Osmia* spp. As with the solitary bees, these mason bees are unlikely to be confused with the Common or German wasps. Their colouration is very similar to the honey bee and quite frequently they are associated with buildings. They prefer to make their nests in suitable cavities in buildings and will even excavate soft mortar from brickwork to make their individual nests. Although harmless in all other respects, and indeed beneficial in pollinating plants and fruit trees, the damage to soft mortar in older properties may be quite severe over several seasons. Re-pointing the brickwork is a

partial cure but the bees return each season and will often tunnel around the new mortar. Their stings seem unable to penetrate human skin.

Bumble Bee *Bombus* spp Most people can recognise the large furry bees, considerably larger than the honey bee and frequently with the tip of the abdomen coloured brightly in ochre yellow or a rich tawny colour. These are social insects, although not as well organised as the honey bee. Usually the nests are produced in holes in trees, or possibly by excavating in soft or sandy earth. They produce no significant store of honey during the season. The males and females are produced towards the end of summer and only the mated females survive the winter by hibernation. Bumble bees with a noticeable white tip to the abdomen are males of *Bombus terrestris* and make their nests below ground.

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