

SWARMS

How to recognise a swarm of honey bees and what safe action to take

Information and Advice from
The British Beekeepers' Association

The BBKA - supporting bees and beekeepers...



The British Beekeepers' Association, Beekeeping Centre,
National Agricultural Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, CV8 2LG
www.britishbeekeepers.com

What sort of bees are they?

HONEY BEES are slender, mostly brown with lighter bands and a little over half an inch long. These are the only bees kept by bee-keepers. Honey bees may vary in colour, from almost black (like a house-fly) to golden brown (like a teddy bear).

The public are most likely to encounter honeybees in their garden or a park. The bees will be going about their business collecting Nectar or Pollen.

If a large quantity of bees is present in one small area, then they are in the early stages of swarming. This is a critical activity for honey bees, as it is their means of colony reproduction. Despite all their activity, they are not usually aggressive to humans during this stage of their lives.

If a swarm is in progress, you will see a lot of bees flying and milling about over perhaps a ten to twenty metre area – the air will appear 'thick with bees'. If you watch carefully from a safe distance, you will see the activity is centred around a cluster of bees on a branch (or sometimes a man-made object) some way off the ground.

Eventually, in an hour or less, the flying activity will more-or-less cease and the hanging cluster of bees will remain in place.

This is a **SWARM** - it can be collected by a beekeeper and turned back into a productive honey bee colony. Eventually, if left to itself, this cluster will fly off to a new home, usually within 24 hours.

You may also find honey bees that have taken up residence in parts of buildings; cavity walls via airbricks and chimneys are both popular. In this case all you will see are bees coming and going in a purposeful way, not milling about.

It may be possible to remove the bees, depending on access and structural considerations. Very, very occasionally you may come across a swarm cluster that has forgotten to move on and taken up permanent residence where it clustered, usually in a thick, well-sheltered hedge.

The removal of honey bee colonies from structures needs to be planned by experts. Do not attempt it yourself because, even if you kill the honey bees, you will leave behind a lot of their honey which will attract other honey bees and wasps, so you will be back to where you started.

Any residual pesticide used to kill the colony will be picked up and most likely be transferred to managed colonies of honey bees and kill them too. Most poisonings of honeybee colonies occur for this reason. If the origin of the poisoning is identified, the user will be prosecuted and a substantial fine imposed.

The so-called 'killer bees' (correctly, Africanised honeybees) beloved of movie-makers **DO NOT OCCUR IN THE UK.**



Honey Bee



Honey Bee with Pollen Sack



Honey Bee Swarm



A 'Cast' or small Swarm



White Tailed Bumblebee



Queen Bumblebee



Common Wasp



Solitary Bee

BUMBLEBEES are often confused with honeybees.

However, they are larger, furrier and dark-coloured except for stripes across the ends of their tails. The stripes may be light tan or orange or brown and there may be a number of them, depending on the exact species. They also appear to have two sizes, the larger (a queen bumblebee) can be about the size of the end of your thumb and the smaller (the worker) is about the size of the end of your little finger.

Bumblebees can sting but are very, very difficult to provoke, however they do not swarm.

They nest either in small cavities in walls or more commonly, in holes in the ground (old outdoor mouse nests are popular) or in cavities under sheds or under furniture in sheds. They do not like disturbance. The nest will be no more than 10-20 cm across.

Bumblebees also like to nest in undisturbed compost heaps, piles of small leaves, sticks, bricks and such-like, where they can keep warm and use the gaps in the heap as nesting space. If you stir up a compost heap and bees come out, they are probably bumblebees. Honeybees do not nest like this; wasps do only very rarely.

WASPS are slender and yellow with black. These are often confused with honeybees, as they are more-or-less the same size. However, wasps ALWAYS have bright yellow and black stripes and body markings.

Wasp nests can be underground (sometimes) or hanging from an undisturbed branch or in a loft space. The nests are usually roughly spherical, ranging in size from that of a cricket ball to a large beach ball. They are an off-white or pastel brown/grey colour and made of paper chewed from soft wood by the wasps.

Wasps do not swarm or hang around outdoors in clusters.

While wasps have some value to the gardener in spring and summer as predators of aphids and other small plant pests, they can be a nuisance to the public and to honey bees (they often rob beehives of their honey). You should not attempt to move or destroy a Wasps nest – it could be dangerous or even fatal to do so. The best course of action is usually destruction of their nest – this MUST be done by a licenced Pest Controller.

HORNETS look like BIG wasps (at least two or three times the size); the colours, markings and nest structure are all very similar.

They are not common in domestic circumstances, preferring trees in woods. LEAVE THEM WELL ALONE – the phrase “stirring up a hornets’ nest” is not just a cliché. They can be dealt with in the same way as wasps.

MASON BEES may make holes in the lime mortar of old walls, but again the damage is seldom significant.

MINING BEES are frequently confused with honey bees particularly when seen in any number as can happen in the spring when many emerge in the same place from holes in the ground around which is a small volcano like mound of soil. The males emerge first and fly around waiting for the emergence of female bees.

OTHER INSECTS that can be confused with the above are the solitary bees. These often look like flies or honey bees, and as their name implies, live on their own. Apart from natural habitats, you may encounter them in domestic airbricks (the holes are just the right size for a single bee to live in) or small holes in soft dry ground such as old sand piles or where sheltered by an overhanging roof. They are harmless and best left alone – they do not swarm (by definition) and few can sting or are aggressive. Leaf cutter bees will cut neat pieces from rose leaves and other shrubs this very seldom seriously damages the plant and the bees are fascinating to observe at work.

What should I do?

If you have a swarm, the number of bees may be intimidating, but there is no cause for alarm. Left alone they will not attack you. Seek the help of a beekeeper. Although most beekeepers do not want stray swarms, they will usually move the swarm from your garden, as they are the only people with the expertise to do this safely. If a swarm is not collected it may become a serious nuisance by making its home in places such as a loft, a chimney or a cavity wall.

If you have a Bumblebee nest, cherish it. They are excellent pollinators of fruit. They are not aggressive and very, very seldom use their stings, which inflict little more than a sharp pin-prick. Nests are never reused and wherever located, are unlikely to cause serious inconvenience. A beekeeper may be prepared to move the nest for you, but often the colony does not survive the move. Live and let live if you can.

In Summary

HONEY BEES

- A beekeeper will collect swarms or advise on removing honey bees from structures. Pest controllers will not destroy honey bee colonies.
- Your local police or Environmental Health Officers know how to contact beekeepers in your immediate area.
- Do not attempt to destroy the colony yourself.
- This website – www.britishbeekeepers.com – has a list of beekeeping associations in all counties of the UK who can also help.
- Please do not contact the BBKA headquarters directly unless it is a dire emergency – they can do little to help directly.

WASPS & HORNETS

- If destruction is required, contact a licenced Pest Controller, via your local authority or Yellow Pages.

BUMBLEBEES

- PLEASE leave in place until the autumn, when they will die naturally. Screen the flight path to reduce any disturbance.
- Do not attempt to destroy the colony, they are endangered and a protected species.
- If they must be moved, contact a beekeeper.

OTHER BEES

- Leave alone – as they will cause no harm.
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