

HOW TO IDENTIFY BUMBLEBEES IN SHETLAND

First of all, is it a bumblebee? The Honey Bee 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. If in doubt, capture the insect in a transparent pot (such as a jam jar) and look closely at the wings. 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 fore-wings in a row of hooks.

NORTHERN WHITE-TAILED BUMBLEBEE

(Bombus magnus)

This is a common visitor to gardens and crofting land throughout Shetland, except Fair Isle. It is the earliest species to appear in Shetland in spring, 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).



Bombus hortorum



Bombus jonellus

Colour illustrations © Tony Hopkins, from 'Bumblebees' by O. E. Prys-Jones & S. A. Corbet. Richmond Publishing Co. Ltd.

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', superficially similar to the previous species. Apart from where it is found (in gardens rather

than on the hills) it is best told by its **longer face**, obviously longer than it is wide (see diagram).

'SHETLAND' BUMBLEBEE

(Bombus muscorum)

A common species, found in a variety of habitats 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.



GREAT YELLOW BUMBLEBEE

(Bombus distinguendus)

This is a species which is presumed extinct in Shetland, with no sightings in the past 75 years. It is a rare and declining species throughout the UK, most frequently recorded in north and west Scotland. *Bombus distinguendus* 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 extremely significant, and would need good supporting evidence (a photo or a specimen). It should be quickly reported to SBRC, so that it may be followed up, or confirmed where appropriate.