

Wildlife

Observing garden fauna with wildlife columnist Jean Vernon



Leafcutter bee (left); home-made insect hotels (right).



Bees flying solo



When most people think of bees, they picture bumblebees and honeybees. Yet there are actually around 240 species of other bees found in the UK.

Unimaginatively, these species are called solitary bees – to distinguish them from social bumblebees and honeybees. Ironically, solitary bees often nest in aggregation, giving the impression of community living.

It is a tough life for these little creatures: they can go unnoticed by gardeners, and yet as pollinators go they are perhaps the best of the bunch. They eat pollen, and seek it out in our gardens and the surrounding landscape; their hairy bodies catch pollen grains and spread them from flower to flower.

Solitary bees stay relatively local, feasting on swaths of flowers of the same type, making them excellent pollinators of crop plants such as apples and pears.

Solitary bee types

There are three main types of these insects: cavity nesting bees (which will nest in good, waterproof bug boxes); mining bees that nest in sandy banks; and ground nesting bees, who make those little

volcano-like mounds on lawns. A handful of solitary bees are better known. There are some interesting characters gardeners can meet on sunny summer days, and may grab your attention as they forage – and display some fascinating behaviours.

Stake out a clump of *Stachys byzantina* to see the highly territorial antics of wool carder bees (*Anthidium manicatum*). Males 'see off' any other male of their species waiting to attract 'their' females, who are busy combing ('carding') fluffy leaf fibres to line their egg cells.

Leafcutter bees (*Megachile* species) leave neat, semi-circular holes on the edges of shrub leaves, roses being particularly favoured. Females chew out leafy discs, then carry them back to the nest site to use them to line and seal their egg chambers.

Female solitary bees do most of the work, seeking hollow stems, woodworm holes, or our insect hotels, to find closed-off tunnels in which

to lay their eggs. Some nest in empty snail shells. Mated females make a chamber for each egg, stocking it with a protein-rich mix of pollen and nectar for the hatched larva to eat. The magical transformation from larva to adult bee occurs in the safety of the chamber. ●

Solitary bee facts

Hymenoptera: is the order of insects that includes bees, ants and wasps.

Diversity: globally, there are nearly 20,000 known species of bees.

Plants as partners: flowers have co-evolved with pollinators; in extreme cases only one species of bee carries out pollination.

Wild June

Tips and tasks

- ◆ Insect hotels can attract a range of solitary bees, but it is important they stay dry and waterproof, so hang in a protected spot.
- ◆ June can be warm and dry: provide fresh water for wildlife via birdbaths, and at ground level for small mammals.

Wild news

Roadside verges are the last refuges for some of the UK's rare plants, says charity Plantlife, but most are managed badly. Wood calamint and fen ragwort are now only found on verges – the latter in a ditch by the A134 near Ely, Cambridgeshire.

Last year was one of the worst on record for butterflies: 40 out of 57 species in the annual UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme saw their numbers drop in 2016. www.ukbms.org

- ◆ Read more on wildlife gardening at www.rhs.org.uk/wildlifeblog