



National Bee Unit

Honey bees in the UK

October 2024

There is only one species of honey bee in the UK, while there are around 270 species of wild bees. The majority of honey bees in the UK are not wild but are kept as managed livestock. This fact sheet provides some general advice about honey bees, such as how to deal with a swarm and how to get started with beekeeping.

Honey bees

The majority of honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) in the UK are kept in hives as livestock and require a considerable commitment to manage. Honey bees are managed by beekeepers as a hobby and by bee farmers who maintain hundreds of colonies of bees as a



Figure 1: A female honey bee forages on Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*)

profession. Honey and beeswax can be collected from honey bees and they also provide valuable pollination services to UK food crops; insect-pollinated food crops represented approximately 20% of total crops grown in the UK in 2007¹.

While there is only one species of honey bee in the UK, there are around 270 species of wild bees. Wild bees and other insects also act as pollinators, but some species of wild bees are experiencing declines in the UK; a third of wild bee species have decreased between 1980 and 2019². Managed honey bees are not experiencing declines³. Keeping honey bees is not necessary to support bee populations, and in some areas there is already a very high density of honey bee

colonies. If you are interested in helping bees, please read our fact sheet on [wild bees in the UK](#). An important limiting factor affecting all pollinator populations is the availability of

¹ Breeze, T.D., Bailey, A.P., Balcombe, K.G. and Potts, S.G. (2011) Pollination services in the UK: How important are honey bees? *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*, 142. DOI: doi.org/10.1016/j.agee.2011.03.020

² Powney, G.D., Carvell, C., Edwards, M., *et al.* (2019) Widespread losses of pollinating insects in Britain. *Nature Communications*, 10. DOI: doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-08974-9

³ Wood, T.J., Michez, D., Drossart, M., *et al.*, (2020) Managed honey bees as a radar for wild bee decline? *Apidologie*, 51. DOI: [10.1007/s13592-020-00788-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13592-020-00788-9)

flowering plants that provide pollen and nectar (forage) for pollinators, they are all competing for limited resources. It is beneficial to plant flowers and care for flower rich land that can feed all pollinators.

What to do if bees are nesting in your home

Sometimes colonies of feral honey bees set up home inside building cavities or in chimneys. If honey bees set up their nest in a building, they may be a serious nuisance. There are specialist companies that can relocate them without harming them. They will be able to provide advice on how to prevent future honey bee swarms from nesting in the building. The BBKA has compiled a [list of contacts for honey bee removals](#).

Sometimes wild bees nest in cavities in buildings; they will not cause any damage to the building, the populations tend to be quite small and they are usually docile; we recommend that they are left alone. Unlike colonies of honey bees, wild bees live in much lower numbers and their nesting activities cease in the autumn.

What to do if a swarm settles in your garden

If a very large collection (thousands) of bees settles in your garden, it will be a swarm of honey bees. They should be left alone, as they are likely to move on to a more appropriate site within a day or so. Swarms are particularly common through May and June. If a swarm has settled in an area that is causing a nuisance or potential danger to passers-by, you can call a swarm collector and ask them to collect it. The BBKA has [a website that provides the details of swarm collectors](#); in Scotland, as there are fewer swarm collectors listed, it may be more convenient to contact your local association for further advice. Please be aware that swarm collectors are volunteers and may not always be available immediately; they will only be able to assist with swarms of honey bees before they settle in a building cavity or chimney and will not be able to deal with nests of wasps or other insects. Honey bees will settle in a large cluster (as in Figure 2), while wasps may be present in high numbers but do not cluster together outside the nest. If you have a high level of wasp activity in your garden, check the eaves or any small gaps of your house and outbuildings for signs of coming and going which may indicate the location of a wasp nest. Binoculars can be very useful for this.



Figure 2: Honey bees can settle in a swarm in any number of locations. This swarm has conveniently situated itself on a young apple tree



Figure 3: Honey bees are orange/brown with black stripes (left), while many of the most common wasps are yellow with black markings (middle and right)

What to do if you would like honey bees in the garden without the responsibility of beekeeping

Many individuals would like to benefit from the presence of honey bees, but do not want to undertake the commitment of keeping bees themselves. If you have land and would like to offer it to a beekeeper, you can do this at the British Beekeepers Association (BBKA) website '[offer land to bees](#)'.

If you would like to encourage bees in general, please consider managing your garden to support wild bees. Even a small plot of land, as little as 4m² planted with wild flower mix and carefully managed, could approximately double the number of bumble bees and solitary bees in a year⁴. Please read our fact sheet on wild bees in the UK for more advice.

What to do if you would like to start beekeeping

We recommend that anyone interested in taking up beekeeping should aim to learn as much about it before committing to keeping bees. Honey bees are livestock and looking after just a single colony requires a great deal of commitment. It can be demanding, heavy work at times and colonies may suffer from pests and diseases that need to be managed. Our advisory leaflet '[Starting right with bees](#)' provides an overview of all of the considerations for taking up beekeeping, and resources to help you get started.

We recommend that you contact your local beekeeping association. Associations arrange training sessions, lectures, beginners' classes and meetings. Joining a local association will put you in contact with local beekeepers and help inform the decision to keep bees. Details of where your local association is can be found on the [British Beekeepers Association \(BBKA\) website](#), the [Welsh Beekeepers' Association website](#) for Wales and the [Scottish Beekeepers' Association](#) website for Scotland.

⁴ Griffiths-Lee, J., Nicholls, E. and Goulson, D. (2022) Sown mini-meadows increase pollinator diversity in gardens. *Journal of Insect Conservation*, 26. DOI: doi.org/10.1007/s10841-022-00387-2

National Bee Unit

APHA, Room 11G03, York Biotech Campus,
Sand Hutton, York YO41 1LZ

Telephone: 03003030094 email: nbu@apha.gov.uk

Web site: www.nationalbeeunit.com

October 2024

© Crown copyright 2024

You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v.3. To view this licence visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/ or email PSI@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk