



Bee Careful!

Why we should be protecting our pollinators

I AM sitting quietly in a meadow surrounded by hawthorn in full bridal dress. Warm sunshine has lured out a squadron of bees from my partner, Iomhair's, hives. They flit back and forth to the blossom returning shortly, their legs golden with pollen.

These ancient, gnarled trees, sculpted by the prevailing westerly wind, are at their finest at this time, a froth of creamy flowers, the wood pungent with their sweet breath. It's a four-acre site with mature gean and hazel, a haven for badger and red squirrel as well as bees, and in the centre is an area of rough open pasture; bees and butterflies seem content here.

Brambles send fast-growing snares tendrils that transform into impenetrable patches, perfect nest sites for warblers and wrens, and when in flower, bees of many kinds, and a wealth of other insects appear in great number, soothing the atmosphere with their mesmerising thrum.

It's a hypnotic place to wait and watch and fills my soul with hope. During last winter, much of the honey was left for the bees' own use. Iomhair took off a few of the combs for us, but likes to leave the bees with plenty for themselves. He prefers a more natural approach to his beekeeping.

He tops the hive up with extra fondant too. Last winter it was so wet that he was filled with trepidation. However, one warm spring day, when he deemed it clement enough to risk opening the hive, he saw with great relief that his bees had survived.

For honeybees there are good years and bad – honey is like wine, and wet summers do little to enhance production; vintages of late have been notably poor everywhere in Scotland, and pushed the price of honey up dramatically.

Iomhair and I are fast becoming absorbed by one of the most complex natural history stories on earth. Bees are fascinating and have an extraordinary matriarchal society governed by a queen, with workers and drones. By the peak of summer most hives will contain around 30,000-40,000 bees. Their life cycle is elaborate; and the more we both learn, the more we realise that the humble bee is one of nature's most ambitious creations, and we know little.

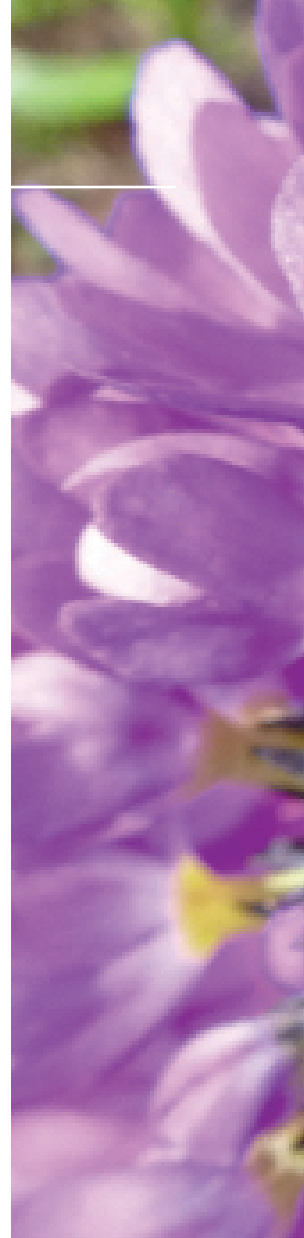
We are fortunate in the British Isles to have some 250 different species of bee; many are increasingly rare, others frighteningly close to extinction. Bees such as the great yellow bumblebee are now restricted to just a few areas of north and west Scotland, and there are projects to help maintain and encourage the natural flower rich meadows that it requires. The machair of the Uists, Benbecula and Barra with their unique flora remain strongholds for this beautiful bee.

Globally there are 20,000 species that we

Healthy
worker
honeybees



The garden
bumblebee





“Of the British Isles’ 250 species of bee, many are increasingly rare, some close to extinction”

know of, and they can be divided roughly into four groups: bumble, solitary, stingless and honey. The honeybee has been most studied. For more than 15,000 years, man has valued it above all others, for its honey, beeswax, royal jelly and propolis. Many tribal people still risk life and limb scaling cliffs and trees, in order to secure the delicious honeycomb laden with golden fruit sugar.

Though the ancient Egyptians studied bees, it was not until the 18th century that Europeans discovered man could work alongside the bee, harvesting its valuable products without detriment to the entire colony, as had been the outcome previously. Monks of various orders

have long worked symbiotically with bees relishing the honey with its myriad properties, and the wax for their candle-making. Today some of the finest, most disease-resistant strains of honeybee are still bred by the famous order of monks at Buckfast Abbey, in Devon.

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) wrote, “If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, man would have four years of life left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man.”

Sadly, this terrifying thought looms closer to reality as daily more bad bee news seeps into my computer’s inbox, and yet another online petition appears for signing. »

POLLY'S PLACES

I admit that when it comes to most, I press delete, but where bees are concerned, I read carefully, and then sign every one. Bees pollinate at least two-thirds of the fruit, vegetables, nuts and crops that we consume on a daily basis. Without bees, Einstein is right, we are finished.

Yet until relatively recently, we had become complacent about the bee, about its fundamental role in our survival, and about our need to nurture it and its entire kin as never before. The increasingly contentious debate rages on regarding the safety of a range of neonicotinoid pesticides. These, the world's most regularly utilised chemicals, are in the opinion of many revered scientists and conservationists, death to the natural world in general, seeping into the soil where their accumulation through time, leads to toxicity.

It is now known that bees returning to their hives also carry the effects of the chemicals with them. They have been found to lead to general dysfunction, and subsequent death due to the fact that bees are unable to navigate, and thus find food.

This is a politically complex issue and, despite intense lobbying, much more needs to be done if we're to safeguard bees' future. Money talks as nature pays the price. These chemicals appear to have such severe knock-on effects that they're every bit as dangerous as horrific products like DDT. We were informed this was perfectly safe. Yet time proved the reverse to be reality; by then the damage was done, much of it irreparable.

Bees are not only important as pollinators, as delightful creatures of great beauty, and as a vital part of every ecosystem, but for centuries man has been aware of dozens of health benefits provided by them. Honey, among a long list of beneficial properties, is antiseptic. It is a delicious and natural source of energy with subtle flavours depending on where the bees have been feeding. In Scotland heather honey is amongst the most popular, and has a distinctive taste. Due to our erratic temperate climate, it has recently become a rare commodity.

Royal jelly is another valuable product produced by bees to feed both larvae and the adult queen, while they turn tree saps and floral essences into propolis, a resin to seal hives. Both are widely used in medicines and cosmetics.

As a new beekeeper, with little experience and much to learn, lomhair is already finding that working gently with his bees is not only therapeutic, but also important. He is now witnessing at first hand the many marvels of this small insect. He says that beekeepers are like lawyers – put two in a room together and you will end up with three different opinions – but all seem wonderfully willing to give endless help and advice.

His mentor is retired schoolteacher Torquil MacKenzie who learned about bees on the heather moorlands surrounding his childhood home, near Carbridge, where he still takes some of his hives in summer. We have been buying Torquil's honey for a long time and find it unsurpassed, and his gentle approach to beekeeping has have made time spent in his company at a premium.

In recent years honeybees have been suffering from a range of devastating problems, including the dreaded varroa mite and CCD – colony collapse disorder. Beekeepers countrywide are extremely worried. Our need to nurture bees is greater than ever.

While lomhair is becoming more absorbed in caring for his bees, I in turn have been changing my way of gardening. I now leave sprawling patches of lawn to its own devices and am richly rewarded with a fantastical fizz of insects, including a range of bees feasting on the wild flower pollen. Tiny orchids spring up to emerge in all their finery on what was previously a dull patch of lawn.

I am seeking out and encouraging plants that bees and other pollinators find attractive: buddleia, foxglove, self-heal, clover, thyme, lavender, bergamot (bee balm), guelder rose, marjoram, honeysuckle and knapweed.

Even the much-maligned dandelion, that sets roadside verges and waste places aglow, is relished by insects. We simply have to change our attitude, and nurture the wild. ◻



Inula offers a good food source



Hawthorns' bridal finery



Torquil, our bee-keeping mentor

“In Scotland, heather honey is amongst the most popular, and has a distinctive taste”



Buddleia is a favourite of bees

FASCINATING FACTS...

A western honeybee has a lifespan of anything between one and 10 months.

Some species of bee, mainly those found in tropical countries, are nocturnal, helping them avoid predators.

The average worker bee produces about 1/12th teaspoon of honey in her lifetime.

Honey bees can fly at a nippy 25kph (16mph)