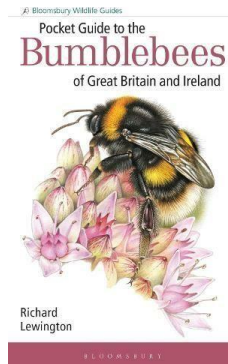


BOOK REVIEW
by Mike LeRoy



Pocket Guide to the Bumblebees of Great Britain and Ireland –
by Richard Lewington

Bloomsbury 2023 – paperback: full price £10.99

Bumblebee identification is easy: you just sort out the white-tails from the buff-tails, look where the yellow bands are, then note the red-tail bumblebees. No, their identification is not so easy. You need a good field guide to help you, and not just a few pages in a general insects field guide.

The easiest time of the year to identify (i/d) bumblebees is when the queens emerge and over spring and early summer, after which identification gets trickier, but is still do-able. Cuckoo bumblebees make things more complicated. Around June onwards the males of all species emerge and they don't look quite like the females they relate to. And there are bumblebee look-alikes such as some of the: solitary bees, hoverflies, robber-flies, and even the Bumblefly.

For decades I used various bumblebee i/d leaflets, posters, magazine articles, books and online resources to attempt to identify bumblebees. I found none of them entirely satisfactory. But now we have by far the best guide of all.

Many of you will be familiar with Richard Lewington's colour illustrations in numerous books. He draws exactly what he sees, with precision and clarity. As an experienced entomologist, he knows the subtle as well as the obvious features essential for accurate i/d and represents them clearly. I hope that many of you have his *Pocket Guide to the Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland* (Bloomsbury, 2nd edition 2015). For me, this beats all the rest of the butterfly guides, because it has every feature needed in the field, in a compact size to fit a small pocket. This new Bumblebees pocket guide has all the same merits.

This bumblebee field guide has the following useful features. The introductory pages tell us about: bumblebee structure and anatomy, true bumblebees and cuckoo bumblebees, males and females, the life cycle, and conservation. Then there is the illustrated overview: a double-page spread of 'the big seven' most common species, which are the only widespread and abundant species. These pages are followed by

two double-page spreads giving an at-a-glance guide to all 22 species you might ever see in Britain or Ireland, including several that we see around MK in addition to the 'big seven'. Then come the individual species accounts: a double-page spread for all 22. For each of these we have illustrations of: queen, worker, male, and variants; and essential information on: nests, foodplant, similar species, as well as a distribution map and a diagram of which months the queens, workers and males can be seen.

Interspersed through the book are double-page spreads to help you distinguish between similar species. These cover: garden bumblebees, early bumblebees, white-tails, red-tails, common carder-bumblebees, and male cuckoo bumblebees. This is rounded off with a four-page spread of mimics and lookalikes.

Even our two 'extinct in Britain' species are illustrated, so you can lament the Apple Bumblebee, last seen in Kent in the 19th century, and Cullum's Bumblebee, last seen in Oxfordshire in 1941. You can worry for the fate of all the declining bumblebees such as the Great Yellow Bumblebee or the Shrill Carder, now seen in very few sites in Britain.

When I first moved to MK, I was surprised that national maps of distribution of bumblebees had few records of bumblebees in the Milton Keynes area. I hope this is changing because they are all around us and they need to be recognised and recorded. You can contribute to awareness of what is happening to all our British bumblebees by learning how to identify them, then submitting reliable records through iRecord or direct to BMERC (the environmental records centre for our area). If you submit records of bumblebees around where you live that will fill out our knowledge of their local distribution and the habitats each species are in. Perhaps with all our thousands of acres of parklands and green spaces in MK we have more bumblebees than most urban areas and surrounding farmland? We don't know.

If you use only photos of bumblebees, you will probably find it difficult to learn their i/d because their black and furry bodies don't photograph well and photos are often at an angle that misses important features, such as the face, tail and legs. This is one reason why Richard Lewington's illustrations are so valuable.

This slim pocket-book is a gem. It is rounded off with a section about gardens and bumblebees' favourite plants. If you have a garden, why not make sure you have wildflowers in it that bumblebees prefer: they are named in this book.

You can buy a copy of this bumblebee pocket guide book though Waterstones; or from some online natural history and entomology booksellers currently selling this at £8.99, which is cheaper than Amazon. If you persuade a few friends to buy one too, you could share the postage cost. Buy this book and slip it into your pocket, ready to work out what you are seeing. I hope we will see more about bumblebees on our website Sightings page and you will enjoy knowing which ones you see.

Mike LeRoy
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