

Leading a Bumblebee Walk – a Step by Step Guide

By Clive Hill



Introduction

What follows may appear rather long and taxing, but in reality much of what is involved with leading a Bumblebee Walk will flow naturally and with minimal effort. So, please consider this a Check List and Prompt, rather than something to be used to the letter. After all you, as leader, must get satisfaction and pleasure from helping your group enjoy themselves and learn.

1. Walk Leader's Necessary Skills

Enthusiasm about bumblebees and ability to pass on this enthusiasm to others.
Awareness of potential locations where you can see bumblebees.
Awareness of plants flowering at the time of the walk, including their common names.
Knowledge of how to identify the common bumblebee species, using colour guides.
Ability to catch foraging bumblebees and get them into bug pots for close-up viewing.
Able to use email communication.
Able to use mobile phone for emergencies.

2. Your Objectives

- a) To pass on to others some of your enthusiasm for, and knowledge of bumblebees.
- b) To build up people's enthusiasm about bumblebees, by increasing their familiarity and knowledge of them.
- c) To build up people's confidence with seeing bees at close quarters.
- d) To increase your "customer's" familiarity with the common bumblebee species.

3. Planning & Preparation

You'll need to work out where to go to see the bees, when to hold the walk and where to meet up.

3.1 Practicalities

Time of Year - the various species of bee show different foraging preferences and these can become very obvious when a range of different types of flower are out simultaneously.
You must be sure of finding a good number on bees and should know what species to expect.
The location needs to be readily recognisable and accessible by car or on foot.
You need car parking facilities and ideally toilets available at the meeting point.
Work out the start point's map reference and ideally also the postcode (for sat nav systems)
Talk with BBCT to arrange publicity.
Use email to communicate with your visitors.
Work out how will you cope if it turns out to be raining?
You may need to arrange lift-sharing to people who come by public transport.

3.2 Safety Issues

Make sure your group will be safe – walk the route in advance and identify any hazards.
Suggest they wear strong footwear, suitable for rough ground.
You need to have a First Aid Kit available and a mobile phone on – in case of emergencies
How will you cope with wet or uneven ground?
Could you cope with someone with mobility problems? If not, it is okay (and legal) to specify that you walk will not be suitable for people with limited mobility.
Parents must be responsible for child safety.
If someone gets stung, reassure them and recommend (but DO NOT hand out) anti-histamine tablets, such as Zirtek, to minimise any effects. Watch out for sudden onset of anaphylactic shock, which would show as a large rash, inflammation, dizziness and breathing difficulties.
Call 999 immediately if you suspect anaphylactic shock. Current thinking suggests that casualties should lie prone and be kept warm.



3.3 Walk Location choice

Use a map to spot locations and footpaths which link them together.
 I use a circular route of about a mile and aim for a combination of places.
 Try to ensure the places you'll visit could be interesting for your group.
 You must be sure of seeing bees visiting flowers in easy reach.
 Make use of readily available facilities
 Choose somewhere to meet-up and use as base, and to chat afterwards.
 You might get advice from your local Wildlife Group, Park Rangers etc.
 The local Park could well be fine, or a Garden, Allotments, a stretch of Canal Bank or Riverside, a length of Wildflower hedge, a local Nature Reserve, a piece of chalk Downland or a 'Brownfield' location - perhaps even a Garden Centre.

3.4 Flowers

What flowers will the bees be working?
 Bees work a well defined sequence of flowers over the period from Spring to Autumn.
 You'll find that the different species of bee work different types of flowers.
 In rough order of flowering date, look out for the following:
 Winter Heathers, Willow catkins, Dandelions, Raspberries, Sage, Comfrey, Trefoil, Clover, Lime Trees, Bramble, Dahlias, Willowherb, Waterside weeds like Himalayan Balsam.
 You could walk the same route repeatedly over several weeks and see different species of bee foraging on the different flowers from the sequence.



3.5 Groups

Your group members will come forward as volunteers in reaction to the publicity (in the BBCT newsletter and on their website).
 Some people come many miles to these events, by both car and public transport, so it's important to make it worthwhile for them.
 With a common interest in bees, everybody will mesh easily and you'll see friendly interaction and chatter.
 Expect 6 – 12 people maximum, with perhaps a dog too. You can specify any maximum number you feel comfortable with.
 Larger groups will be progressively harder work as numbers go up.

3.6 Publicity and Communication

BBCT will advertise walks on the website and send contact details to people who want to come – this works extremely well.
 Your start point must be readily accessible by car or foot and ideally include parking facilities and toilets.
 Work out its map reference and postcode.
 Use email communication to send out details of its location, start time, how to find the place, and a contact mobile number.
 An email link to Google Earth can help explain locations.

3.7 Bumblebees

Having only the 'Big Six' common bees is perfectly adequate - they'll give you plenty to talk about.
 You don't need rarities, but they will cause quite a buzz if they do turn up.

You can use 'Bug Pots' to allow the group to see bees really close up.
Try to make sure everyone has a go catching them.
Talk about the bees you see and if you catch any for a close-look, pass them round.

4. RESOURCES

Take an ID guide (book or sheet – BBCT can supply either) with you and show how to use it.



4.1 Bug Pots

The photo shows examples of those I've found.
During a walk I like to put a few bees in 'Bug Pots', so people see how amazingly furry and pollen dusted they are, close up.
You don't keep the bee long and when let go, it starts foraging again.

You can catch bees by putting the pot over them while they're working a flower, then quickly adding the lid.

Often you need to use a butterfly net to catch, then transfer them to the pot inside the net.

You can get bug pots in National Trust, or Museum shops.

Expect to pay £2 to £3 each.

Avoid pots that are too large - the bees fly around and won't keep still!

Another useful device is a tube with a mesh cover at one end and a removable soft-faced plunger at the other. Beekeepers call these 'Queen Marking Cages' and they're wonderful for gently immobilising a bee for close study.

4.2 Nets

Butterfly nets are invaluable for catching bees so you can study them.

You can get these ready-made from Watkins & Doncaster, at moderate price – but note that BBCT may be able to supply you with one or more for the purposes of leading a walk.

To save money, you can buy just the net bag from them and use it on a Fisherman's Landing Net frame.

<http://www.watdon.co.uk>

When you catch a bee, immediately let the bag sag, to trap it.

Then with it trapped, raise the end of the bag.

The bee will run to the uppermost end and, in the net, can then be persuaded into a Bug Pot.

4.3 Extras

Take a camera with you, to record the event, and the bees found.

I like to bring along a selection of BBCT leaflets, including the excellent "Gardening for Bumblebees" and some ID guides for people to use.

Also, some of the key books, for people to see if you have these.

An old nest is always a great source of interest and a re-homed live colony even better.

(They're so different to honeybees people know from TV, or Observation Hives.)

I ask if they can spare a donation for BBCT and send these through later.

If there is time and the facilities, a cup of tea and a chat rounds off the event and all go home happily.

I like to compose a brief summary of the event and send it to those partaking and BBCT.

5. Conclusion

So, I very much hope that after reading the above notes you feel well prepared and able to lead a walk for BBCT. It really is very rewarding passing on your knowledge and enthusiasm. People go away with smiles on their faces and a different outlook on the world of bees!

NOTE:

Once you have run a walk for BBCT, if you feel you could add further details to these guidelines then please do get in touch (enquiries@bumblebeeconservation.org)