

Bombus monticola, the bilberry or mountain bumblebee

A walk that is the bee's knees!

Meopham U3A's bee watch group records bumblebee sightings as part of a national monitoring scheme, writes **Eleanor Mair**

What could be nicer than strolling through countryside on a summer's day, recording the number of bumblebees you come across?

Each month, from March to October, members of the bee watch group of Meopham U3A in Kent follow fixed routes through different habitats, recording the bumblebees they spot for the Bumblebee Conservation Trust's BeeWalk recording scheme.

Bumblebees are great pollinators, helping to produce much of the food we eat and pollinating wildflowers, which are the basis of complex food chains.

But they have been declining in the UK over the past century. The Bumblebee Conservation Trust says this is largely due to changes in the way countryside is managed, reducing the numbers of flowering plants bumblebees feed on.

Since World War II, 97 per cent of wildflower meadows in the UK have been lost, and in the last century two species of bumblebee became extinct in Britain, with a further eight of the 24 remaining species on the endangered list.

The first U3A group of its kind, Meopham's began in 2017. It devised three local walks. Each is divided into sections through different habitats and on flat ground to enable as many people as possible to join in. The walkers identify the



bumblebee's species and whether it is a queen, female worker or male.

Group convenor Chris Hague-Smith explains: "If one person does the recording and you walk as a group, you're supporting each other, you're learning together and you've got this social element. We're trying to tag it as 'a walk with a purpose'. We think it works rather well."

The group was trained by Dr Nikki Gammans from the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. Now members train those who are new to the group. Resources, help and courses are available from wildlife groups.

Bumblebees, with their "bumbling" flight and distinctive buzz, pollinate on a huge scale. Unlike honeybees, they do not make honey; the queen hibernates over winter and emerges in spring.

The walks mean that the group gets a snapshot of how bumblebees are doing. "In 2018, the Beast from the East had quite an effect on bees, but they do recover," says Chris. "Later that same



GARDENING FOR BEES

Aim to have at least two bee-friendly plants, such as lavender, foxglove, verbena, cosmos and honeysuckle, in your garden, allotment or window box, flowering from March to October.

The Bumblebee Conservation Trust website has suggestions for bumblebee-friendly plants, from herbs and flowers to trees and lawns.

bumblebeeconservation.org

year, we saw 176 bumblebees in one day – it took us about two hours for one walk – the best day we've ever had."

For those thinking of setting up a bee watch group, choosing the walking route is very important: "Don't be in a hurry, try several walks first, get yourselves a route that works." Individuals can also be more bee-friendly, says Chris. "You can grow bee-friendly plants – the Bumblebee Conservation Trust will give you advice."

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT BEEWALK, GO TO BUMBLEBEECONSERVATION.ORG/BEEWALK