

Honey bees at the Scottish Parliament

FAQ's

The following information is intended to answer some of the most frequently raised issues and concerns regarding location of honey bees in or close by publically accessible areas.

Q; What does a Honey Bee look like?

A: The Honey Bee is the smallest of the bees common to this country and are just over 1cm long with 6 legs, 4 wings, a slightly hairy thorax and a brown and amber striped body, culminating in the sting.



Figure 1: Honey Bees returning with pollen



Figure 2: Honey Bee



Figure 3: Wasp

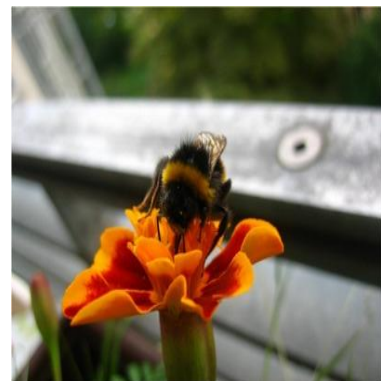


Figure 4: Bumblebee

Q:When will the bees arrive?

A: Dependent on the weather during spring the colony will arrive towards the end of May or the beginning of June

Q: Will we get honey?

A: You will get honey but possibly not this year as we concentrate on growing the colony to a sufficient size to enable it to get through winter. If the weather is like summer 2013 you may get honey. Honey will be available to purchase by staff and members and to the general public through the Parliament shop and some will be made available in the Parliament's staff restaurant for building users to use on breakfast cereal.

Q: How many bees will be in the hive?

A: The number of Honey Bees in the colony will depend on the time of year. At the beginning of spring the colony is at its smallest with a Queen and hopefully 10-15 thousand worker (females). There are no drones (males) in the colony at this time, towards the middle of summer the colony will have grown depending on weather to hopefully 30-40 thousand workers, a few hundred drones and again only 1 queen. As the colony grows in number you will see the hive begin to get taller, as the bees are given more space.

Q: Do Honey Bees sting?

A: Honey Bees do sting but only if handled roughly or if you go too near their hive. Unlike wasps, which can sting numerous times the honey bee will die if she stings.

Q: How likely am I to be stung by honey bees?

A: Honey Bees flying outside the hive are looking for 2 things - nectar and pollen. Due to the size of the honey bee it is unlikely you will see it flying around but you may hear it buzzing gently in the garden. If you panic and start waving your arms about and running around you are more likely to hit the bee which is only going about her business. Simply walk calmly away.

Q: What happens if I get stung by a honey bee?

A: Being stung by a honey bee is like receiving a sharp pin prick. The most important thing to do is to remove the sting as soon as you can. It is visible and should be scratched out using either a finger nail a key or a credit card, do **NOT pinch** it to pull it out as this will result in more venom being squeezed into the sting site. The bee will be lying nearby dying and may still be buzzing angrily. Almost immediately the skin immediately around the sting will become inflamed and white, turning red as the body's natural defence mechanisms flood the area with natural antihistamines which tries to engulf the venom. There will be a circle of redness around the sting depending on the amount of venom injected and your body's reaction, this redness can vary from 2-3cms across to 10-12cms across. You can supplement your body's natural histamine reaction by taking widely available medication for the chemist such as Piriton, or Chlorphenamine. Alternatively Boots sell a sting and bite liquipen which contains ammonia a powerful alkali which while it will nip initially but soon relieves the pain of the sting. The area of redness can last for a couple of days depending on how individuals react. The site will become itchy, this is a sign of the inflammation reducing.

Q: What happens if I'm allergic to Honey Bee stings and get stung?

A: If you have had a severe reaction to bee stings before you will know what you need to do, it does depend where on the body you get stung. Areas around the face and neck can lead to swelling which may require a speedy visit to hospital.

Q: Will we get honey?

A: You will get honey but possibly not this year as we concentrate on growing the colony to a sufficient size to enable it to get through winter. If the weather is like summer 2013 you may get honey. Honey will be available to purchase by staff and members and to the general public through the Parliament shop.

Q: Do honey bees swarm?

A: Yes, Honey bees swarm because of lack of space or overheating within the hive. The beekeepers taking care of the colony will ensure the colony has plenty of space and it will be checked every 5 days during the summer months looking for signs of swarm behaviour.

Q: What does a swarm look like?

A: If you are in the vicinity (up to 50ft to 75ft of a swarming colony) you'll know both by the noise – a swarming colony sounds like you are standing directly behind the engine of a jet aeroplane revving up immediately before take off – and by the sight of thousands of bees spiralling upwards like a black tornado. This cluster of bees will most likely settle on a tree branch or part of a wall whilst the scouts try to locate a new home. Contrary to popular belief a swarm is not aggressive, although you would not want to walk into a swarm. Remember, bees sting for 2 reasons being handled roughly or because they are guarding their hive, a swarm has no home so that won't be the reason for stings.

Q: Why are Scotland's honey bee populations declining at such an alarming rate?

A: The decline in Honey Bee numbers is due to a number of elements. By far the biggest threat to the honey bee is the parasitic mite called Varroa Destructor Mite, which feeds on the bees. Regular checks by the beekeepers involve monitoring the levels of varroa within the hive. Treatments are carried out as and when necessary. Prolonged wet summers, destruction of the natural foraging habitat of the honey bees and the use of controversial pesticides also impact on colony growth and the ability to fight off natural infections and diseases.