

School-to-Nature



Rusty-Patched Bumblebee

Rusty-Patched Bumblebees have been seen on Conservancy properties and are native to the eastern U.S. The queen bumblebee is almost an inch long, and workers are just over a half-inch, about the size of the tip of your little finger. As you can see from the photos, the golden-brown patch on the back of the body gives this bumblebee its special name. The Rusty-Patch also has an all-black head.

Rusty-Patch Bumblebees are considered herbivores, because their food consists of the nectar and pollen of the plants they visit. They must live near a constant supply of flowers from April through September. They are not honey-producers; in fact, they produce only the equivalent of one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in a lifetime. They nest underground in a grassy area away from traveled pathways, often in a den space left by a rodent or other animal. They live just one season, leaving behind a protected “spring queen” who emerges from hibernation and then seeks out a new grassy underground nesting site. She has the job of seeking pollen and nectar from early-blooming flowers, then begins to lay her eggs in the chosen nest, using sperm she has stored in her body from mating the previous autumn. The workers that hatch out collect more food, defend the growing colony of thousands, and tend the newer young bumblebees. At the end of the season, new queens and drones hatch and fly out to mate with those from other colonies. Only the new queens survive the winter in underground hibernation, usually in a wooded area.

The Rusty Patched Bumblebee is the only bee on the U.S. Endangered Species List because populations have dropped so steeply. These bees eat, dwell, and overwinter in areas that may now be disastrously separated because of development or because feeding zones are plowed under or mowed. Even mowing a lawn can destroy a nest. If you observe a bumblebee nesting area, protect it and leave it alone. These bees are vitally-needed pollinators.

October 2022 BH / DL