

Bumblebee Tales: The Folklore of Bumblebees

Nearly all bee folklore relates to honey bees rather than to bumblebees, as bees and bee hives were of major importance in ancient times. Bees are seen as messengers from the other realms and as beings of wisdom, sacred messengers of the Gods. They are also seen as family members, and they would be kept informed of family events such as deaths and births. But wild bumblebees, like hares, come into a slightly different category in myths and legends, and are sometimes associated with witches and wizards. What appears to be a bumblebee or a hare, may really be a human who has shape-shifted into another form.



Some stories say that if a lone bumblebee enters your house, it is a sign of wealth and good fortune is on the way to you. Another tradition says that if a bumblebee buzzes at your window, it signifies that a visitor is on the way. A red-tailed bumblebee means that a man will come. A white tailed bumblebee means that a woman will come. If you mistakenly kill the visiting bumblebee, then the news that comes will be unpleasant.

The Brehon Laws had a special section for bees called *Bech Bretha* (the Laws governing bees). Again, the Laws concern mainly honeybees, beekeepers, swarms and stings. One interesting law concerns bees trespassing. Bees were seen to be trespassing if they gathered nectar and pollen from lands other than the lands from their owner's lands. The landowner or beekeeper was allowed three years grace, but if the bees continued to forage on others lands in the fourth year, then a payment of a first swarm must be given in recompense.



This Law encouraged a beekeeper to grow bee-friendly pollen and nectar-rich plants on their own lands in order to keep the bees happy within their boundaries.

But all this diverges from the much loved wild bumblebee that has its own free life, not entangled in the lives of humans other than their very valuable service as pollinators of our food crops.

Who does not love the sound of a bumblebee's lazy buzzing in the first days of Spring, reminding

us of warm days to come and invoking memories of long hot summers, picnics and outdoor evenings? The buzzing that you hear from a bumblebee is not created by their wings but by the bee vibrating its flight muscles. It can buzz without moving its wings as it has a decoupling mechanism to do that. This is done to warm up their bodies to a sufficient temperature to fly when the temperature outside is not warm enough. Their internal thoracic temperature can reach up to 30°C. The genus name '*Bombus*' is derived from a Latin word for a buzzing or humming sound.

A piece of music entitled 'The Flight of the Bumblebee' was composed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1899-1900, mainly for violins, as part of an opera. It is supposed to convey the chaotic and changing flying pattern of bumblebees. In reality, their flight patterns are far from random and chaotic as they forage in set patterns and revisit stands of plants in a planned manner, even to the point of scent marking the flowers they have already visited so that they do not waste time visiting plants they have already fed from.

Bumblebees can forage up to 2 km from their nests and are known to reach speeds of up to 15 metres per second which is 54 km per hour. You probably have heard them flying fast and high in the evenings as they return to their nests. They are also very clever at knowing where they are and getting home to the correct nest, even if there are many others near to theirs.

It was worked out that bumblebees should not be aerodynamically able to fly. However their wings move in a figure of eight pattern which creates vortices above them and resembles the way a helicopter can fly.

St Gobnait is the Irish saint associated with bees in Ireland. Her feast day is 11th of February and her church was at Ballyvourney in Co Cork. She was said to be a beekeeper and use honey as a cure for the sick. She has a story attached to her that she sent bees to chase a robber, and that bees guarded her church much in the same way as a guard dog might.

So to put an end to my tale, I will recount a story from Hilda M. Ransome's book entitled 'The sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore'

'A woman went to Louth to consult the wise man. He put his head in a cupboard, mumbling some incantations to his familiar spirit. On reopening the door of the cupboard, a large bumblebee flew out and settled on the open book. The wise man noted the page on which the bumblebee alighted and gave his advice accordingly.'

We ourselves will be wise men and women to pay attention to the places the bumblebee lands and in that way to pay attention to the conservation of their habitats and this is the best advice I can give you today.

Online references:

<https://www.irishhedgerows.weebly.com>

<https://www.galwaybeekeepers.com>

<https://www.irelandswildlife.com>



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