

## Become Bee-sotted!

*Bumble bee identification for absolute beginners. Find out how easy it is by reading these tips from Victoria Otton.*

If you are feeling the urge to learn more about bees, but don't know where to begin, let me help you. I'm new to this myself and am happy to share some of my bees-for-beginners tips.

The best piece of advice I received is this: Start by learning how to recognize the common species of bumble bees. There are hundreds of bee species in our area, and what with wasps, and flies that mimic the appearance of bees, it can all be a bit confusing for a beginner. However, bumble bees are easy to recognize: they're big, round and fuzzy. Even better, there are only 5 or 6 bumble bee species that you're likely to spot here.

Another good piece of advice is to call bees by their scientific names. Yes, you might sound like a know-it-all, but the common names are applied so variably that they have very little value and just add to the confusion. And many bee species don't have a common name. Bumble bees belong to the genus called *Bombus*, a word coming from the Greek for "low humming sound".

My third (and best) tip is to access the simple guide to local bumble bees produced by UBC's Project Bee Smart. This guide is available as a [pdf](#) and is copied below with permission. There are many other online resources with good information; one of the best is [Bumble Bee Watch](#).

Here are some additional identification tips that I've gleaned from various sources, including an [article](#) by UBC graduate student Jennifer Lipka.

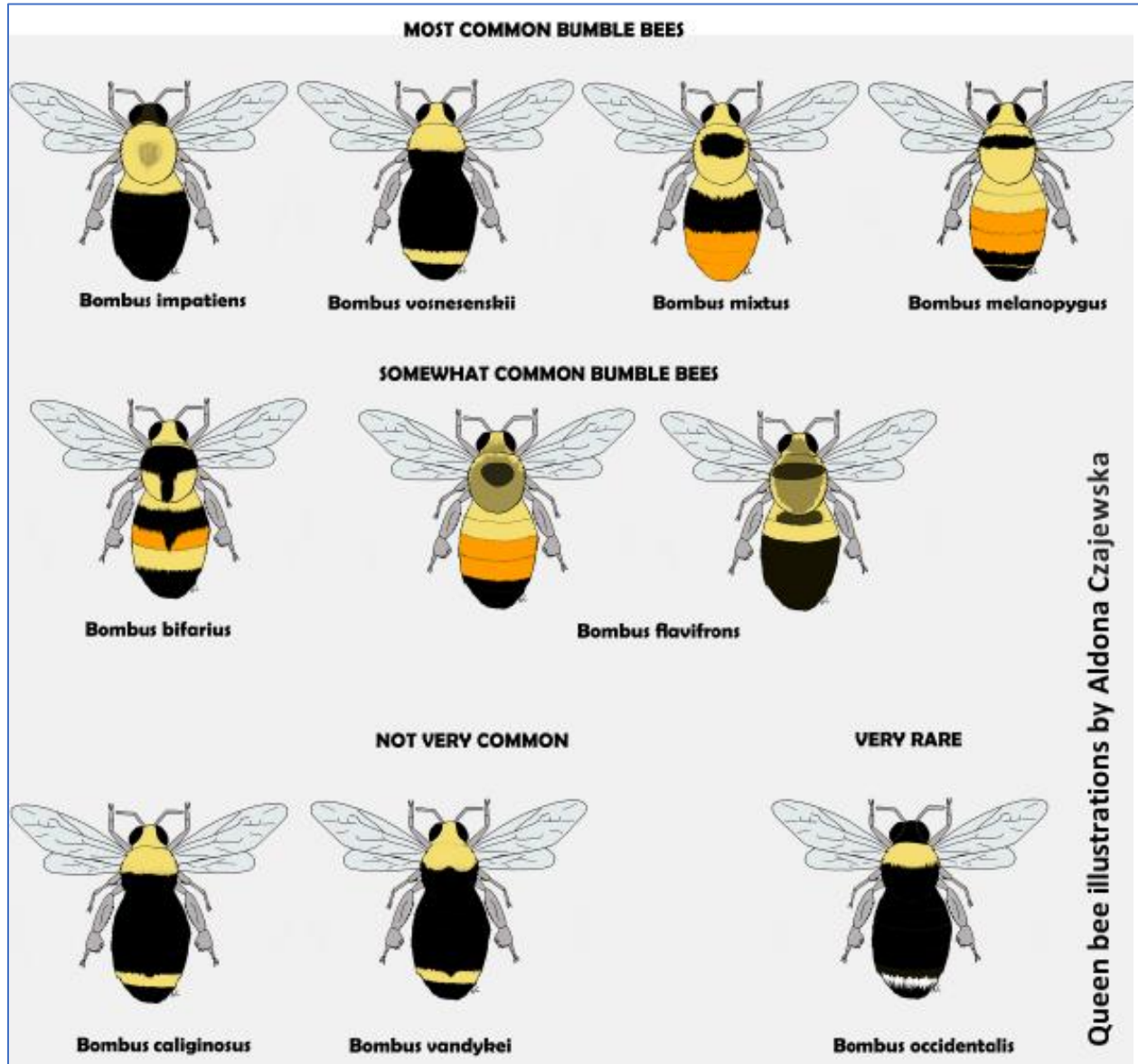
*Bombus vosnesenskii* will likely be the first species you'll identify unequivocally. It's common and has a distinctive yellow band near the end of its abdomen. Its shoulders and face are yellow, giving it its common name 'yellow-faced bumble bee'.

*B. impatiens* is also distinctive: look for a black face, a yellow thorax, and an abdomen that is almost completely black. Jennifer Lipka says that the yellow is a bit more cream-coloured on this bee than on the other bumble bees. *B. impatiens* is called the 'common Eastern bumble bee'. It is an escapee from greenhouses (where it is used as a pollinator) that has naturalized now in BC.

The two common red-rumped bees are a little trickier to identify but look closely at the order of the coloured bands: *B. mixtus* has yellow-black-orange colour banding (and is fuzzier than most bumble bees), while the order of the colour bands on *B. melanopygus* is bright yellow-orange-black. Its common name is the 'black tailed bumble bee'.

The two yellow or whitish "spots" near the base of the wings of *B. bifarius* make this bee relatively easy to identify. You could view this pattern another way, and look for the large black T-shape on its thorax. Note: In 2020, genetic analyses of local *B. bifarius* bees pointed to ours being a separate species, *B. vancouverensis*. Its common name is still the 'two-formed bumble bee'.

And lastly, *B. flavifrons* (common name is the ‘yellow-headed bumble bee’) comes in two forms, with and without the red banded abdomen. The key i.d. tip with this species is the greyish head and thorax that makes them look like they’ve just rolled in soot.



A note about *B. occidentalis*, the Western Bumble Bee: they have disappeared, and no one knows why! If you see this distinctive white-bottomed bee, get a photo and report it immediately to [Bumble Bee Watch](#).

One last tip: Only female bees collect pollen. You are safe to assume a “she/her” gender assignment with any bee whose hind legs are loaded with pollen.

The David Suzuki Foundation recently hosted a webinar on bees and other insect pollinators by author and entomologist, Linda Gilkeson. This is an excellent and inspiring presentation and is worth watching and re-watching. DSF's Jode Roberts has kindly provided us with the [link to a recording](#) of Linda's presentation.

I'll end with a warning: **Bees Are Addictive!** I can almost guarantee that you'll be asking for a macro-camera lens for your next birthday!