Local Nature

BUMBLEBEE'S SOS—A PLEA FOR HELP

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Illustration by Trudy Nicholson

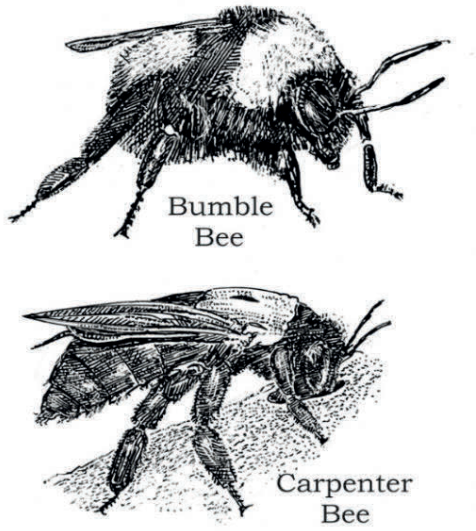
In my childhood in New Jersey, I can remember stretching out on a carpet of red clover in spring and summer, pulsing with the sounds of bumblebees. The bumblebees were hard at work, sipping nectar from the tiny clover flowers and dandelions and gathering saffron-colored pollen into their little leg baskets. Only much later did I learn that these storage structures were modified hairs, rather than the tiny picnic baskets of my vivid imagination. I lay prone for hours, watching bees go about their business; school was out, and I had nothing better to do than linger in the backyard of our small bungalow tracking these flying dervishes.

Today, in Cabin John, most parents of young children wouldn't approve of their young children sprawled out on the lawn to meditate on bumblebees. For one reason, it would be a waste of time: there are so few bumblebees left. During the past twenty years, populations of bumblebees in the U.S. have nosedived. Five states in the western U.S. and three eastern states—Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island—have seen the extinction of bumblebees. Elsewhere, such as in Maryland, populations are in steep decline. The second reason health-conscious parents would keep their kids and pets off the artificially controlled grass lawn is because the only way to maintain their own little green rectangle is through the massive application of harmful—if not deadly— chemicals.

Maryland Ecology 101: in our local area, the natural vegetation is comprised of hardwood forests. Trying to maintain a grass lawn is to fight constantly against nature. And the only way to prevent the annual deluge of seeds of broad-leaved trees and shrubs from overtaking your lawn is to poison them, daring them to take root amidst the sward of putting-green grass.

But our suburban lawns are an illusion as symbols of tranquility: while conveying a sense of calm and order, they are dead zones, harboring no insects that feed the birds around us, killing the earthworms that aerate the soil, and becoming a death trap for bees, flies, and other important pollinators that might land on a few flowering weeds in the midst of the grass and ingest or become covered in herbicides. As I quoted in an earlier column, the food writer Michael Pollan described a grass lawn as "a garden under totalitarian control."

Forget the aesthetics, and let's turn to economics and assess what we are losing as a nation in the decline of bumblebees. The bumblebee and other bee species pollinate more than 70 out of our top 100 food crops. If you complain about high prices for fruits and some vegetables pollinated by bees, imagine what prices will be when farmers must resort to hand pollination (widely impractical) or to carting colonies of bees and their beekeepers around agricultural areas of the country at the precise time to pollinate crops, far beyond current pollinator transport to augment the declining populations of honeybees and bumblebees. Pollination is one of those ecosystem services that nature provides for free but would be unaffordable to replicate in some other fashion.



So, what do we need to turn things around for the humble, hard-working bumblebee? The recent plan issued by the Biden administration for two-thirds of all automobiles produced in the U.S. to be electric by 2035 is immensely encouraging and an essential milestone to move our world from reliance on fossil fuels and avoid climate breakdown. Even in 2023, a walk in the neighborhood requires you to keep an eye out for the quiet and increasingly common electric vehicles whooshing by. So, the outlook, at least in zip code 20818, is quite a rosy picture. Let me offer another vision to accompany the lines of electric vehicles in the neighborhood: that by 2035, two-thirds of all single-family homes will have at least half their yard converted from grass lawns doused with herbicides to gardens of native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers that need no pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, or watering. And yards full of a resurgent population of bumblebees. Cabin John as a wild pollinator preserve, the first in Maryland.

We all want to save the whales that ply the oceans. But let's not neglect our responsibilities here at home. We can start by saving the bumblebee in our backyards. VN