

Soldierflies and Allies Recording Scheme:

Identifying bee-flies in genus *Bombylius*

Compiled by Martin C. Harvey

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In Britain there are four species of bee-fly in genus *Bombylius*, including perhaps the recording scheme's most familiar fly: the Dark-edged Bee-fly *Bombylius major*.

All four *Bombylius* have a long proboscis ('tongue') extending forward from the head, which they use to feed on nectar from flowering plants, often doing so while hovering over the flowers. They lay their eggs into the nests of solitary bees, where the bee-fly larvae prey on the bee larvae.

The Dark-edged Bee-fly is by far the most frequently seen species, and is a familiar feature of early spring in gardens as well as countryside. In the south Dotted Bee-fly can also be numerous in suitable places. The other two species are smaller and rarer: the Western Bee-fly in a mix of habitats in western England and Wales, the Heath Bee-fly a specialist of heaths and largely confined to Dorset.

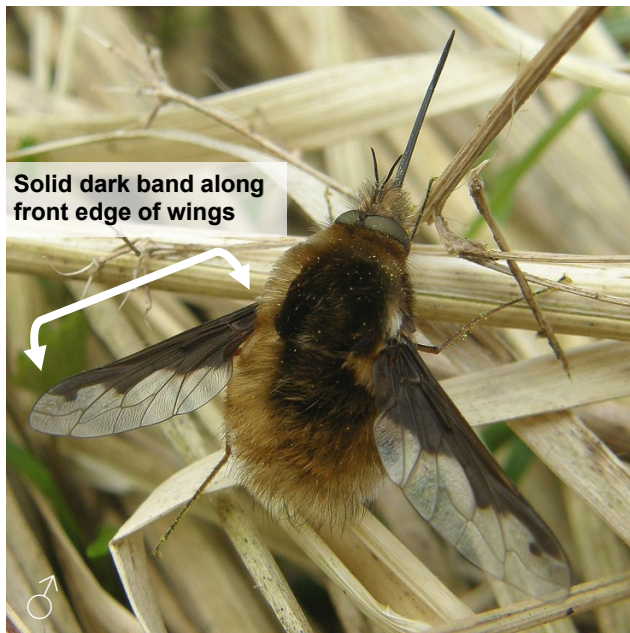
Dark-edged Bee-fly, *Bombylius major*

Photo © Steven Falk

Main identification feature: check the dark edge to the wing (but wait until it stops flying to see this!).

Body colour: looks evenly tawny-brown in flight.

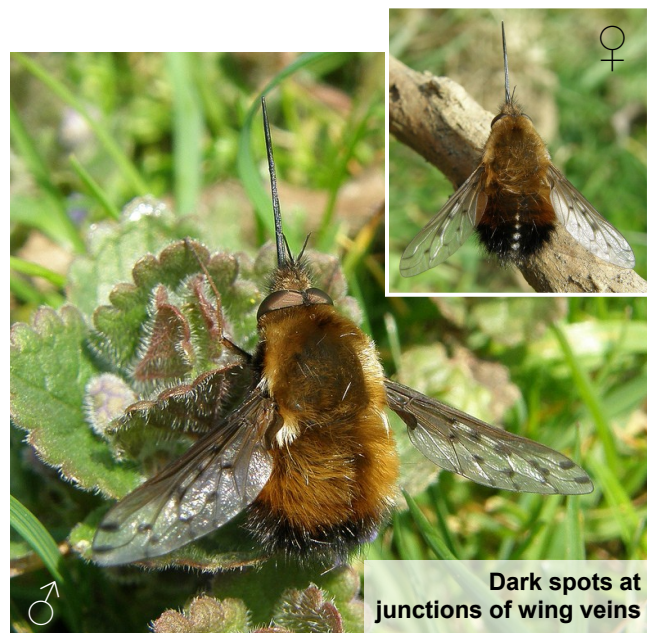
Size: body length (not including the extended proboscis): 6–12.5mm.

Flight time: March-June, most frequent April–May.

Distribution: widespread in Wales and the southern half of England, less common but spreading further north into Scotland.

Habitats: varied, including gardens, grasslands, woodland rides and clearings, coasts.

Hosts: various species of *Andrena* mining bees.

Dotted Bee-fly, *Bombylius discolor*

Photos © Steven Falk

Main identification feature: check the spots on the wings (but wait until it stops flying to see this!).

Body colour: mix of chestnut and black; female (inset photo) has line of white spots on abdomen.

Size: body length (not including the extended proboscis): 8–12mm.

Flight time: March-June, most frequent in April.

Distribution: largely confined to southern England and the south Wales coast, but spreading north to Warwickshire and perhaps increasing.

Habitats: varied, including gardens, grasslands, woodland rides and clearings, coasts.

Hosts: species of *Andrena* mining bees, especially *Andrena flavipes* and *Andrena cineraria*.

Western Bee-fly, *Bombylius canescens*

Photo © Steven Falk



Photo © Martin Harvey

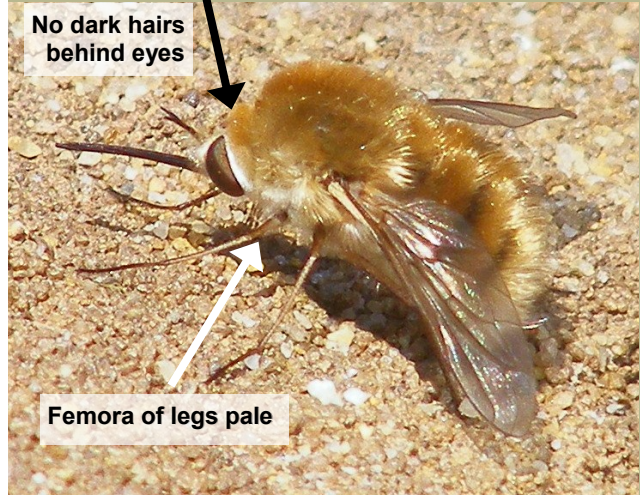


Underside:
dark femora
with pale tips

Main identification features: wings are unmarked; long black bristles among the pale hairs on the side of the head behind the eyes; femora of legs (the long segment nearest the body) dark, often with pale tips (can look all pale in photos from above).
Size: body length (not including the extended proboscis): 6.5–7.5mm.
Flight time: May–August, most frequent June–July.
Distribution: mainly confined to south-west England and south Wales.
Habitats: open flowery habitats such as hillsides and gorges, river banks and coastal landslips.
Hosts: species of *Lasioglossum* and *Halictus* mining bees.

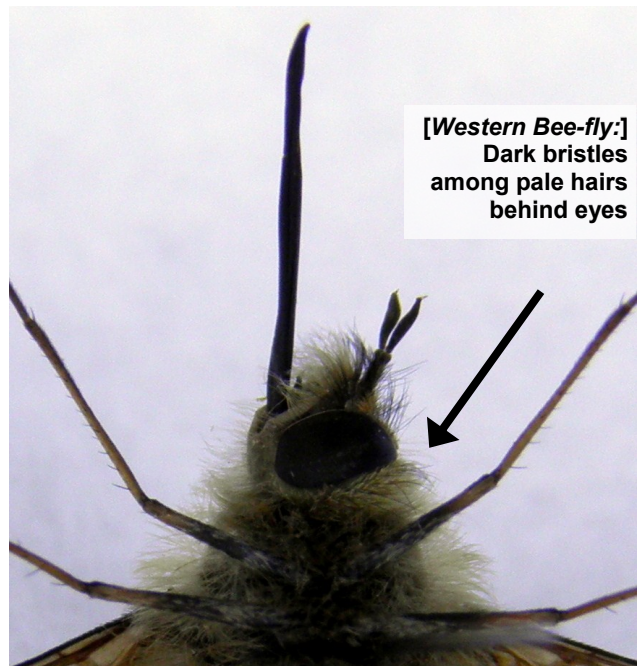
Heath Bee-fly, *Bombylius minor*

Photo © Jane Adams



Main identification features: wings are unmarked; all hairs pale on the side of the head behind the eyes (NO black bristles here); femora of legs pale.
Size: body length (not including the extended proboscis): 7–8.5mm.
Flight time: July–August.
Distribution: recent records from Dorset and Isle of Man only; formerly known from the New Forest, Isle of Wight, and west Wales coast.
Habitats: heathland.
Hosts: species of *Colletes* mining bees.

Photo © Martin Harvey



[Western Bee-fly:]
Dark bristles
among pale hairs
behind eyes

For more information on bee-flies, and how to send in records, see:
www.brc.ac.uk/soldierflies-and-allies/

For help with identification add your photos to iSpot:
www.ispotnature.org/species-dictionaries/uksi/Bombyliidae