



## Rusty Patched Bumble Bee *Bombus affinis*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the rusty patched bumble bee as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Endangered species are animals and plants that are in danger of becoming extinct. Identifying, protecting and recovering endangered species is a primary objective of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program.

### What is a rusty patched bumble bee?

**Appearance:** Rusty patched bumble bees live in colonies that include a single queen and female workers. The colony produces males and new queens in late summer. Queens are the largest bees in the colony, and workers are the smallest. All rusty patched bumble bees have entirely black heads, but only workers and males have a rusty reddish patch centrally located on the back.

**Habitat:** Rusty patched bumble bees once occupied grasslands and tallgrass prairies of the Upper Midwest and Northeast, but most grasslands and prairies have been lost, degraded, or fragmented by conversion to other uses. Bumble bees need areas that provide nectar and pollen from flowers, nesting sites (underground and abandoned rodent cavities or clumps of grasses), and overwintering sites for hibernating queens (undisturbed soil).



*Illustrations of a rusty patched bumble bee queen (left), worker (center), and male (right) by Elaine Evans, The Xerces Society.*



*Photo courtesy of Christy Stewart*

**Reproduction:** Rusty patched bumble bee colonies have an annual cycle. In spring, solitary queens emerge and find nest sites, collect nectar and pollen from flowers and begin laying eggs, which are fertilized by sperm stored since mating the previous fall. Workers hatch from these first eggs and colonies grow as workers collect food, defend the colony, and care for young. Queens remain within the nests and continue laying eggs. In late summer, new queens and males also hatch from eggs. Males disperse to mate with new queens from other colonies. In fall, founding queens, workers and males die. Only new queens go into diapause (a form of hibernation) over winter - and the cycle begins again in spring.

**Feeding Habits:** Bumble bees gather pollen and nectar from a variety of flowering plants. The rusty patched emerges early in spring and is one of the last species to go into hibernation.

### Why conserve rusty patched bumble bees?

As pollinators, rusty patched bumble bees contribute to our food security and the healthy functioning of our ecosystems. Bumble bees are keystone species in most ecosystems, necessary not only for native wildflower reproduction, but also for creating seeds and fruits that feed wildlife as diverse as songbirds and grizzly bears.

Bumble bees are among the most important pollinators of crops such as blueberries, cranberries, and clover and almost the only insect pollinators of tomatoes. Bumble bees are more effective pollinators than honey bees for some crops because of their ability to "buzz pollinate." The economic value of pollination services provided by native insects (mostly bees) is estimated at \$3 billion per year in the United States.

It needs a constant supply and diversity of flowers blooming throughout the colony's long life, April through September.

**Range:** Historically, the rusty patched bumble bee was broadly distributed across the eastern United States and Upper Midwest, from Maine in the U.S. and southern Quebec and Ontario in Canada, south to the northeast corner of Georgia, reaching west to the eastern edges of North and South Dakota. Its range included 28 states, the District of Columbia and 2 provinces in Canada. Since 2000, this bumble bee has been reported from only 13 states and 1 province: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, Wisconsin – and Ontario, Canada.

### **Why is the rusty patched bumble bee declining?**

**Habitat loss and degradation:** Most prairies and grasslands of the Upper Midwest and Northeast have been converted to monoculture farms or developed areas, such as cities and roads. Grasslands that remain tend to be small and isolated.

**Intensive farming:** Increases in farm size and technology advances improved the operating efficiency of farms but have led to practices that harm bumble bees: increased use of pesticides, loss of crop diversity resulting in flowering crops being available for only a short time, loss of hedgerows with flowering plants, and loss of legume pastures.

**Disease:** Pathogens and parasites may pose a threat, although their prevalence and effects in North American bumble bees are not well understood.

**Pesticides:** The rusty patched bumble bee may be vulnerable to pesticides. Pesticides are used widely on farms and in cities and have both lethal and sublethal toxic effects.

Bumble bees can absorb toxins directly through their exoskeleton and through contaminated nectar and pollen. Rusty patched bumble bees nest in the ground and may be susceptible to pesticides that persist in agricultural soils, lawns and turf.

**Global climate change:** Climate changes that may harm bumble bees include increased temperature and precipitation extremes, increased drought, early snow melt and late frost events. These changes may lead to more exposure to or susceptibility to disease, fewer flowering plants, fewer places for queens to hibernate and nest, less time for foraging due to high temperatures, and asynchronous flowering plant and bumble bee spring emergence.

### **What is being done to conserve rusty patched bumble bees?**

#### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:**

Several Service programs work to assess, protect, and restore pollinators and their habitats. Also, the Service works with partners to recover endangered and threatened pollinators and pollinator-dependent plants. Concern about pollinator declines prompted formation of the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign, a collaboration of people dedicated to pollinator conservation and education. The Service has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Pollinator Partnership to work together on those goals. The Service is a natural collaborator because our mission is to work with others to conserve, fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.

**Other Efforts:** Trusts, conservancies, restoration groups and partnerships are supporting pollinator initiatives and incorporating native plants that support bees and other pollinators into their current activities. For example, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service is working with landowners in Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and

Wisconsin to make bee-friendly conservation improvements to their land. Improvements include the practices of planting cover crops, wildflowers, or native grasses and improved management on grazing lands.

**Research:** Researchers are studying and monitoring the impacts of GMO crops and certain pesticides on pollinators. Efforts by citizen scientists and researchers to determine the status of declining bee species are underway throughout the United States.

### **What can I do to help conserve the rusty patched bumble bee?**

**Garden:** Grow a garden or add a flowering tree or shrub to your yard. Even small areas or containers on patios can provide nectar and pollen for native bees.

**Native plants:** Use native plants in your yard such as lupines, asters, bee balm, native prairie plants and spring ephemerals. Don't forget spring blooming shrubs like ninebark and pussy willow! Avoid invasive non-native plants and remove them if they invade your yard. For more information on attracting native pollinators, visit [www.fws.gov/pollinators/pdfs/PollinatorBookletFinalrevWeb.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/pollinators/pdfs/PollinatorBookletFinalrevWeb.pdf).

**Natural landscapes:** Provide natural areas - many bumble bees build nests in undisturbed soil, abandoned rodent burrows or grass clumps. Keep some unmowed, brushy areas and tolerate bumble bee nests if you find them. Reduce tilling soil and mowing where bumble bees might nest. Support natural areas in your community, county and state.

**Minimize:** Limit the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizer whenever possible or avoid them entirely. Pesticides cause lethal and sublethal effects to bees and other pollinators.