The Red Mason-bee (Osmia bicornis) is a very familiar and distinctive spring-flying solitary bee in gardens, parks and allotments. It is found in towns, cities and villages throughout England, Wales and lowland Scotland as far north as Perthshire (although Scottish records are still rather patchy). The bee is newly introduced into Ireland. Like many common and widespread species, the fine details of its distribution are less well known (or reported).

On continental Europe, the species is equally widespread, but the continental colour form is different to that found in the UK, and is generally darker. There is a single flight period each year and it is found from late March to early June (occasionally later). Peak activity matches the flowering period of the mass-flowering fruit trees such as Apple and Pear, ie late April to mid-May. The males usually emerge about two weeks before the females.

Osmia bicornis has potential as a managed pollinator of fruit crops.

Habitat and Conservation

Osmia bicornis nests in a variety of existing aerial cavities, and can easily be coaxied into using cut bamboo stems or stiff cardboard tubing. The brood cells are constructed in a linear fashion, and the cell partitions and the closing nest plug are made of mud.

The bees forage for pollen at an extremely broad range of flowering plants. Osmia bicornis can be encouraged by putting out artificial nests sites. These can be grand constructions (like bee hotels) to a collection of cut bamboo stems in a tube.

Ideally, these should be placed in an open position, bout 1-2m above the ground in a south facing direction along a wall or fence.

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Photos: L. Hislop & K. Nichols