

How “Climate Chaos” Affects Bumblebees

By Mary Wilson

A recent *National Geographic* article (February 6, 2020), connects the decline of bumblebees to climate change. While recognizing the two previously cited reasons for decline, loss of habitat and effect of pesticides, this third stressor, climate change, highlights a new reason for concern.

“Climate chaos” is cited as a primary driver of this decline. Many species of insects are being pushed beyond temperatures they haven’t previously been exposed to.

The new research finds that in North America bumblebees are 50% less likely to be seen in any given area than prior to 1974. While fuzzy-bodied bumblebees are more suited to cold weather, it is unclear just how much adaptability they have to rising temperatures.

Additionally, a disconnect between timing of insect emergence and availability of plant resources is a result of climate change. Bumblebee queens, who must survive a winter and then prepare and maintain a brood in the spring, are particularly vulnerable to shifts in temperature, things like unusually early ice melts and re-freezes. With an unusually warm late winter, she may emerge only to find that the floral resources she needs are not available to her.

At first it seems overwhelming to think that we can do anything significant to counteract this new danger for our pollinators. But even the smallest modification may help - things like reducing your carbon footprint as much as you can; planting shrubs and lots of other floral resources for bumblebees and insects in general; and anything to cool your yard such as planting trees to provide shade and act as a carbon sink. And, of course, supporting the Pollinator Pathway. And be happy when you see one of those wonderful, fuzzy bumblebees in your yard!

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