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International Rescue Planned for Endangered English Bumblebee

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More than a century after being transported to New Zealand to pollinate crops of red clover, the short-haired bumblebee is set to make a return to its mother country, England, where it has been extinct for 20 years.



Photo of short-haired bumblebee by Dave Goulson, courtesy Natural England

The short-haired bumblebee was last seen in England in 1988--and declared officially extinct 12 years later when it could not be found in an intensive search.

But for over a century a small number of the original English population has clung on in New Zealand. The bee was transported to the Pacific Ocean island country in the late Nineteenth Century to pollinate crops of red clover. New Zealand had no native species of bumblebees to help propagate crops introduced from England.

A project to reintroduce the short-haired bumblebee to England, from the New Zealand population, was announced earlier this week by a consortium of conservation organizations: [Natural England](#), the [Bumblebee Conservation Trust](#), the [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds \(RSPB\)](#), and [Hymettus](#), a charity that promotes conservation of bees, wasps and ants in the UK.

Natural England is an independent public body whose purpose is to protect and improve England's natural environment and encourage people to enjoy and get involved in their surroundings.



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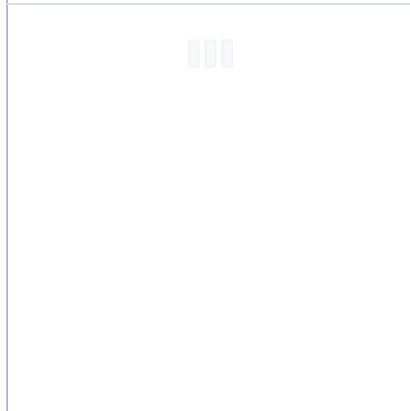
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As head of National Geographic's daily online news service, David Braun has a front-row seat on developments in the fields of science, nature, and cultures. This blog will give you David's unique perspective on the news, including access to some of the interesting stories that don't make it onto the news site, behind-the-scenes details about life in the National Geographic newsroom, and David's insights

The consortium's bumblebee repatriation plan is to air-freight hibernating bees to England some time next year and release them in sites where their natural habitat of wild flowers has been restored in Kent County, in the southeast part of the country.

Farmers Maintain Bumblebee Habitat

Local farmers have been recruited to help create and maintain the appropriate habitat. Gardeners are encouraged to pitch in by growing wild flowers preferred by the bumblebees.

The incoming bumblebees will be descendants of hibernating queens that were shipped to New Zealand aboard the first refrigerated lamb boats about 120 years ago, according to Natural England.

The bees established small populations on the South Island of New Zealand, where the climate is very similar to that of England. "There they remain, unprotected and under threat," Natural England said in a news release.

Unlike their cousins who became extinct in England, the New Zealand settlers are thought to have been able to survive because introduced English flowers have continued to grow in some abundance on South Island. Over the last 70 years the UK has lost 98 percent of its wild flowers meadows, causing a serious decline in the numbers of bumblebees.

The reintroduction project aims to develop a captive breeding program through which populations could be re-introduced onto selected sites in southern England, Natural England said.

The international rescue mission has two aims: to restore habitat in England, thereby giving existing bees a boost; and to bring the short-haired bumblebee home where it can be protected.

The project hinges on the creation of healthy bumblebee habitat with the help of farmers in South East England, many of whom are already taking part in schemes to support the pollinating powers of bumblebees

"By recreating the habitat needed for this bee species, it all helps other endangered bee species and other important species which depend on this environment such as barn owls, yellow hammers, water voles and the marsh mallow moth," Natural England said.

"Bumblebees are suffering unprecedented international declines and drastic action is required to aid their recovery," said Poul Christensen, Natural England's acting chairman. "Bumblebees play a key role in maintaining food supplies--we rely on their ability to pollinate crops and we have to do all we can to provide suitable habitat and to sustain the diversity of bee species."

Bee Diversity Vital for Wildflowers

The Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT) is "tremendously excited to be part of this project to repatriate one of our loveliest insects from the other side of the globe. Conserving bumblebees in all their diversity is vital if we are to keep healthy populations of the many wildflowers that they pollinate," said the charity's Dave Goulson.

"The loss of this bumblebee is a prime example of the pressures faced by the UK's natural environment," said Malcolm Ausden, senior reserves ecologist at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. "The RSPB is committed to protecting our rich array of wildlife. Our reserve at Dungeness was the last place where this bee was found in the UK, so it's fitting it should be the place where we try to reintroduce it.

"The site is a haven for bumblebees and a huge amount of work has been done to improve the site for them and encourage the flowering plants they love. It is not often you get a chance to bring back a species which has been lost. With the short-haired bumblebee, the New Zealand population gives us an opportunity to do just that."

The bees are to be released in Dungeness because this is where habitat restoration is currently focused. If reintroduction is



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successful in Dungeness, there may be additional releases of bumblebees on England's Salisbury Plain.

The reintroduction team is working closely with farmers in the Romney Marsh area of Kent. "To date the farmers have supported and backed our project and we are very pleased with the fantastic support they have given us," Natural England said. "Bumblebees pollinate many important agricultural crops and are critical to our farming economy. Farmers and bumblebees need each other."

Farmers who join stewardship schemes get compensation for recreating wild flower habitat.

"My brother and I took over my father's farm in the 1950's and we haven't changed the way it runs," said Simon Ashworth, a farmer in Romney Marsh.. "We farm beef, sheep, potatoes and wheat and all the fields are in ... stewardship schemes. Wild flower boundaries around our fields are planted with pollen and nectar mixes which encourage the foraging of bumblebees,"

Cottage-garden flowers such as lavender, lupins, chives, honey suckle, foxgloves, thyme, wild mint, heathers, rosemary, poppies and aquilegia can help bumblebees.

-- Natural England

Said Larry Cooke, another farmer in Romney Marsh, "Decreasing bumblebee populations will cause a decline in pollination of our important agricultural crops and food production will be seriously affected. We need to realise the value of our bumblebees and the impact of their decline,"

The statements of both farmers were included in the Natural England news release.

English gardeners can help bumblebees by growing cottage-garden flowers such as lavender, lupins, chives, honey suckle, foxgloves, thyme, wild mint, heathers, rosemary, poppies and aquilegia, Natural England said.

There are 250 species of bee in the UK and 25 of these species are bumblebees, including the short-haired bumblebee and one other species of bumblebee that has become extinct.

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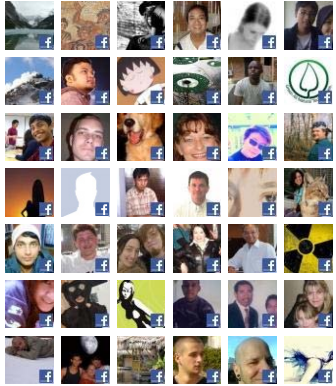
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