

Opal West Midlands



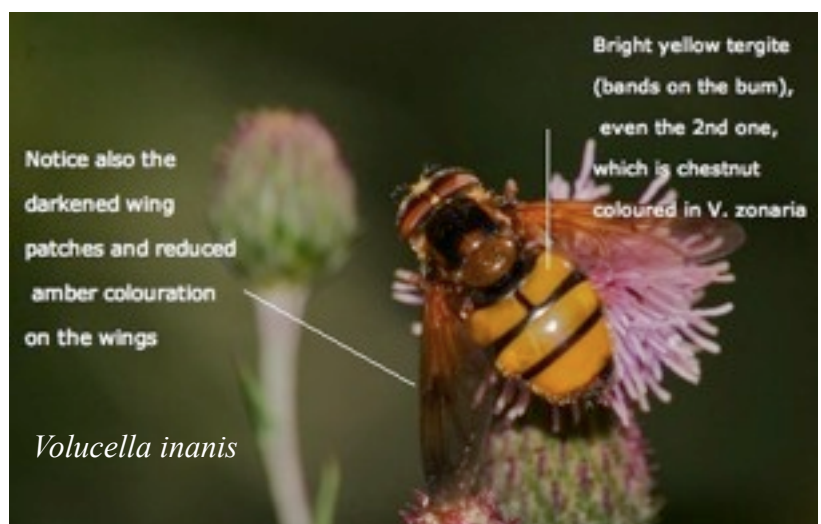
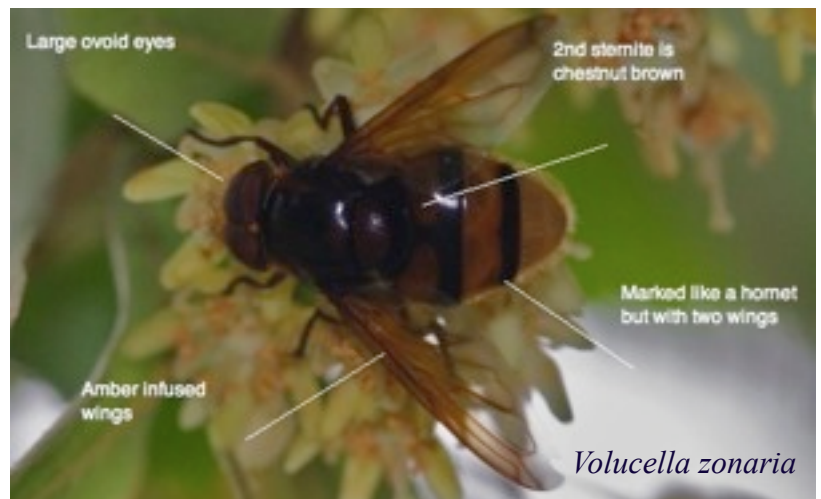
OpalWM - identification guide No 2.

Identification guide No. 2: *Volucella* hoverflies

This installment will focus on identifying large and distinctive *Volucella* hoverflies (*V. zonaria*, *V. inanis*, *V. pellucens*, *V. inflata* and *V. bombylans*). All these species fly through summer (May to August). We'll start with one of the most impressive: *Volucella zonaria*. Well, basically, it is unmistakable. If you think you have seen a large hornet (or a wasp on steroids), but it has two wings, then you have it. It is a very big insect, between 15.5-19.5mm. Have a look at the photographs below for some diagnostics.

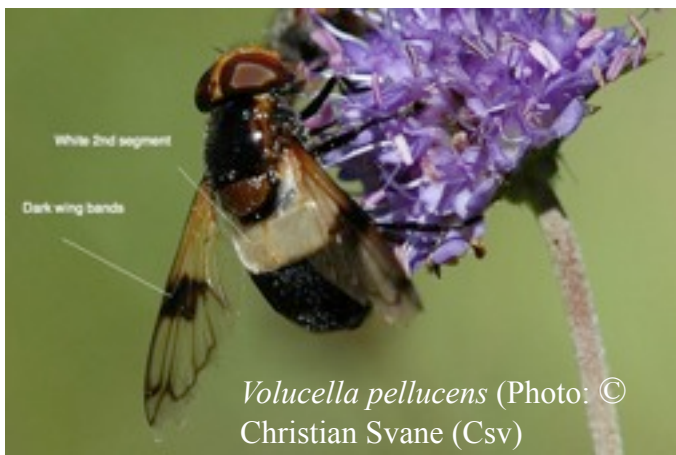
This only species you could mistake *V. zonaria* with is *V. inanis* but there are a number of significant differences: Firstly, *V. inanis* is a fair bit smaller than *V. zonaria*, but we appreciate this is not a useful character unless you have seen both species! Second, the 2nd sternite is yellow not chestnut brown. Lastly, and this is the clincher, look at the second tergite on the underside. It black on *V. zonaria* and yellow in *V. inanis* (see pictures on the next page).

These are both distinctive hoverflies and *V. zonaria* is a relative newcomer to the country, only becoming established in the 1940s. The species was a southern speciality for many years but it is moving north (see this map). The adults are often seen feeding on nectar from flowers, like this specimen, which was feeding on flowers of a Lime tree. The larvae are scavengers and predators in nests of social wasps. *V. inanis* is a native species with a similar southern distribution and similar habits; the larvae are ectoparasites on larvae of social wasps.





The next two species in the genus (*pellucens* and *inflata*) are easily distinguished by their dark wing bands and abdominal colours (i.e. only the second body segment is coloured and the rest are black). *V. pellucens* is by far the most common species of the genus and widely distributed across the UK. You need to look up a lot to see these as they normally hover metres above ground in woodland glades. The adults are also partial to feeding on bramble flowers (*Rubus* spp.). It is very obvious in flight because the second abdominal tergite is white and sufficiently translucent to be very clear from below (see flight photograph). The larvae (like *V. zonaria* and *V. inanis*) are scavengers and predators on the floor of the nest cavity of social wasps.



The fourth species in the genus *V. inflata*, readily distinguished by its round body shape and colour, is the rarest species of the group. It is associated with mature broad-leaved woodland in the SE and Central England. The larvae are linked to sap runs in deciduous trees.

V. bombylans occurs widely in the UK, especially in wooded areas. Like many mimics it occurs in two forms which mimic white (see photograph) and red tailed bumblebees; the latter form is sometimes referred to as var. *plumata*. The larvae are associated with wasp nests.



Want to find out more?

If you are interested to find out more there is a fantastic key available from the British Entomological and Natural History Society:

Stubbs, A.E. and Faulk, S.J. 2002. British Hoverflies: An illustrated identification guide. 2nd edition.

This is how all keys should work - it is brilliant. There is also an active recording scheme to get involved with:

<http://www.hoverfly.org.uk/>

Notes:

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