North Bucks Bee Keepers' Association

Newsletter April 2013

Table of Contents

Calendar at-a-glance

18th May	Young Farmers' rally, Stewkley
22nd September	Honey show
12th October	County honey show

Beginners' Course

The beginners' course is now half-way through. The practical sessions will start in a few weeks. If you would like to help at the classroom of outdoor sessions, please contact chairman@nbbka.org

Equipment for sale

Valerie Gommon of Castlethorpe writes: *I have reluctantly decided that it is probably time to sell my beekeeping equipment. I am not entirely sure what I have, but I used to have several hives (nationals) and have a plastic extractor various other bits and pieces including tools, veil, etc. Please contact valgommon@gmail.com or 01525 385153.*

Regular Columns

April Apiary Notes from Andrew Beer

Like many others from North Bucks I attended the marvellous Bucks Spring Seminar led by our own Chairman Ken, with great aplomb (if you were not there, you do not know what you missed!). I greatly enjoyed Celia Davis's talk entitled "Bee versus Beekeeper", a reminder of the extent to which the beekeeper interferes with the

natural progression of a colony much of it unnecessarily. Celia explained that in undertaking the now obligatory seasonal health frame change, she recommended that beekeepers use the Bailey Frame Change System (queen with the frame she is on is put into a new box, other brood combs left for 2-3 weeks for brood to emerge, at which point the old box and old frames (stores and all) are moved away for sterilisation and refurbishment. Under the Bailey System for avoidance of doubt 100% of the old frames are changed, at the end of each two-year period, i.e. the bees are given a fresh start.

Bailey Comb Change. Many others follow Bailey but for me the plan at least here in North Bucks seems drastic. Think of it this way. The plan will be carried out before Spring build-up: probably at the end of March, beginning of April. As mentioned above, the queen with the frame she is on is put into the new box, the rest of the new box being filled with frames of undrawn foundation. This seems to be a pretty inhospitable environment for the queen, particularly in a late Spring and possibly with snow in April or even early May. Just as important, it would appear to upset the bees just when the oil-seed rape (which represents 50% of my yearly crop) will be coming into flower. Perhaps there is a risk that if really cold weather sets in then the cluster will stay down in the old box, leaving the poor queen and a few bees to their own devices, including death upstairs in the new box. In favour of Bailey the perfectly sound argument will be made that it ensures a varroa break, but the price may be a high one.

Bailey (in case you haven't guessed!) runs counter to my softly-softly-a-bit-at-a-time approach (namely, you change 50% of the old frames each year in each brood box in a phased operation) which I set out in the March newsletter. I would add that two of the County Association's better-known beekeepers do "Bailey" as a matter of course and thought I was off my trolley being so soft. The decision is yours. I will do a "Bailey" on one hive this year, and compare the systems.

Apiary Location. I was with Beds BKA on their beginners' course and we were talking about bees and neighbours. My basic approach (putting legal niceties to one side) is that if there is even a remote risk of the bees being either a nuisance (which may give rise to legal remedies) or an annoyance (which carries none) to neighbours then you ought to put them (your bees, of course) elsewhere even if neighbours are happy initially for you to have bees. One of the Beds beginners stated she had a garden about 200ft in length by 50ft wide with neighbours on either side of the plot and a park at the back. The bees were to be placed at the bottom of the garden, flight path to be over a woven wooden fence about 8ft high and then over the park. My view was that although there were clearly dangers, it was best to give to give it a go. One of my Bedfordshire colleagues thought the site totally unsuitable. However, I can think of countless apiaries similarly placed without trouble or complaint. Indeed, one of my apiaries is at the bottom of a garden separated from the neighbours by high hedges. There has never been any trouble in four years apart from a swarm quickly caught in a neighbouring garden. I trust these thoughts will help you decide where to put your bees.

Swarm Season. As mentioned earlier the beginning of April almost invariably also means the beginning of the swarm season, exact date unpredictable but like a monsoon when it comes IT COMES and we all know about it! I have been called out to a swarm as early as 7th April but unless we have a really cold Spring like Spring 2012, bees will, without control and prevention by the beekeeper's measures, "usually" be starting swarm plans from 10th April onwards with swarms emerging from and after the 20th. In any event, these timings are little more than generalisation and like everything else to do with bees, are weather-, forage-, and of course bee temperament- and even beekeeper-dependent. And one must add that a strong colony led by a first-class queen may well not attempt to swarm until her second full season. Each year, I buy several of Ged Marshall's "Buckfast" queens and rarely does swarming occur in their first full season. There is almost a limitless number of books covering swarm prevention and swarm control, and I mention just three as I suspect most members have copies of one or more of these, and if they haven't I cannot over-urge them to obtain at least one.

Books. The books and relevant pages on these subjects are:

- "Get Started in Beekeeping", Adrian & Claire Waring, Hodder Education, 2010. Page 80 onwards. (previously published as "Teach Yourself Beekeeping".)
- "Starting Out with Bees", John Williams, Beecraft, 2010 page 35 onwards.
- "Bee Manual" (Waring, as above.) Haynes Publishing, 2011, page 86 onwards.

So what else is there to say? Rather presumptuously may I add, "Quite a lot". You see, as is often said, bees don't read books and they will do it their way. It will vary from one season to the next, and even in the course of a season. My understanding is that the medical profession will never ever fully understand everything about the human brain, (well, that is what was said on the telly this week) and so it is with bees. So I would say to the beginners, especially, if you follow a swarm control or prevention measure to the letter, don't blame yourselves if your bees don't comply with it. So what advice can I give?

1. Spring Swarm Prevention Inspections. From April onwards until at least 1st July you must do seven-day inspections (seven-day to fit the working week) of all brood chambers of all colonies. If a colony does swarm and the swarmed colony (i.e. the colony in the original brood box has been reduced to one queen cell and there are no eggs or grubs from which bees can raise a new queen) then whilst there is no laying queen the colony brood chamber does not need to be inspected for, say, three weeks, to allow a new queen to emerge, get mated and get into lay. Indeed, the less disturbance the better during the interregnum.

2. Playcells. In a sense until you see a queen cell with an egg in it you can forget all about the books (don't worry if you see, as you will, cups (playcells) without eggs –

regard these as practice runs by the bees, if swarming is intended later, at building queen cells and they do love building them in the same way as you might enjoy a pint!) The point is that playcells don't necessarily mean that bees will or will not later swarm.

3. WOW! There are eggs and larvae in open queen cells. You come to that moment when you see an egg or grub in an open queen cell but there are no sealed queen cells or perhaps there are both eggs and grubs in open queen cells but again no sealed queen cells. The colony is giving you the following messages:

Open queen cells with eggs. *The bees are saying to you....* We are saying we are on course to swarm in 6-8 days' time. Swarm control measures must be taken otherwise we intend to swarm!

Open queen cells with eggs and larvae. *The bees are saying to you....* We are on course to swarm in 0-5 days' time, (i.e. now for the next 5 days). The exact day will depend on the age of our larvae. NOTE: if larvae just formed after the egg stage, an uncontrolled swarm will emerge in 5 days at the earliest; if the queen cells are close to being sealed, uncontrolled swarm may emerge during your inspection! It has happened!

Observation: It is said that bees can abandon swarm plans. In my experience round here in North Bucks they rarely do. Remember bees lost in a swarm means honey lost and in this respect losing a swarm is more serious than losing a queen (who produces no honey!) in April/May – at least after drones are on the wing ready and able to mate.

Keep these timings in the forefront of your mind whenever you do an inspection and operate your swarm control plan within the relevant deadline. What I am trying to say is that it is important to read the bees as well as the books.

4. Operation of your swarm control measures. As mentioned earlier, you must choose your method from "these books" but I hope the following will be helpful to those who have never carried out a swarm control measure before and understandably find the prospect rather daunting.

Whether you are carrying out the Artificial Swarm method or Nucleus method of swarm control (as described in "the books") you normally must find the queen: often not a simple task bearing in mind that you are looking for her in a hive of possibly over 50,000 insects who may or may not be particularly welcoming. The books tell you what to do if you can't find her (probably after ever-mounting anxiety, you have searched the brood chamber at least twice) so may I suggest initially you don't bother even looking for the queen but carry out the following steps immediately.

A. Put colony preparing to swarm, and its whole hive, to one side. For easy handling,

you can separate supers from brood chamber providing you keep exposed brood chamber and supers covered whilst put on one side.

B. Put new brood chamber and floor on the site of the original hive, entrance facing in the same direction.

C. Open original brood chamber and take out the frame with mostly sealed brood. Remove all queen cells on that frame, having first checked that other frames have good open queen cells. You will need them later!

D. Put removed frame with attendant bees into the new brood chamber and fill the rest of the brood chamber with frames of foundation.

E. Add queen excluder over new brood chamber, original supers over that.

F. Old brood chamber is taken to 12ft from its original site, entrance at 90 degrees to the direction it was facing. Re-assemble hive.

G. Next day. The flying, stinging bees will largely be operating from the new hive. Therefore there will be far fewer bees in the original brood chamber and being nurses they ought to be mainly friendly. Finding the queen should be easy, after which you can follow the books to implement your swarm control plan! If the bees flying from the new box are doing so with great enthusiasm you have done an artificial swarm without knowing it because the queen is in the new box!

5. If you find sealed queen cells: On your inspection you may find eggs and larvae in open queen cells and sealed queen cells. Don't despair. The queen may not necessarily have gone; if you find her, implement your swarm control plan. On the other hand, if she – and the swarm – have gone, reduce the queen cells to one open queen cell with a good fat larva in it and destroy the rest. Why destroy the sealed cells? They could be duds. Leave for new queen to emerge from retained open queen cell. N.B. If you want increase and are not worried about losing some crop, remove one brood frame with an almost sealed cell, and one of food and all attendant bees, to set up as a separate nuc. Method: see earlier 2013 Newsletter, so no repeat here. However, it is worth mentioning that a colony heavily depleted by a swarm may well produce no crop in the relevant season; if so, you will not sacrifice any crop if you divide the colony into, say, three separate parts, each with one good open queen cell to develop into full colonies in 2014.

Other thoughts. A worry, particularly for beekeepers at this time in the year is the unpredictability of the weather. As I write, two days ago Sevenoaks was impassable because of snow. Today, after a severe overnight frost, bees are literally "a hive of activity". This means that until "Spring has truly sprung" we need to persevere with early Spring tasks which I will quickly summarise:

a. Clean floors. If you haven't done them yet, do them now. Wire floors should need no more than a brush down to remove dead bees, wax cappings, etc.

b. Enough food? All colonies need a minimum of 10lbs of good stores at any time. Because of recent and continuing bad weather I was hesitant to liquid-feed so bees are being given more fondant. Now breeding is well underway, liquid feeding is to be preferred, providing bees can get out on cleansing flights. Also, if you wish to stimulative feed you ought to be doing it now, but again you must delay that until bees are on regular daily flights.

c. Varroa treatment and queen marking. This is a good moment in the next week or so before colonies are supered to finish any varroa treatment. Apparently HiveClean can be used with supers on – I would not, because the treatment can just as well be used with supers off. Good time, too, to mark queens (colour: red)

d. Apiary tidy. I know all of your equipment for swarm control will be all ready for use because I told you to do it! But what about the apiary? A quick saunter around with the rotary will work wonders but don't forget you need to discourage drifting and more vitally to ensure that your queen returning from her mating flight ends up in the right hive. In my experience you need about a 4ft clear flight path in front of the hive and the removal of enough foliage to let light down on to the hive and to allow air to circulate around it. Otherwise retain as many distinguishing natural features as you can (they could make all the difference between a safe return or loss of your queen from her mating flight. And think about graffiti (see below).

e. Graffiti. You have all seen those estate agents' signs "To Let" and perhaps, like me, you may have wished to add a vowel. Well, here is your chance to have even more fun. Get out your old emulsion paints (NOT gloss, it won't breathe), the more shocking the colour the better, and splash whatever you wish over the side of the brood box above the hive entrance. With each brood box, you do something different: don't think too much about what you are doing, the brush in your hand will do the "talking". Why? Your efforts may ensure that a queen otherwise lost comes back to the hive where she is eagerly awaited. In case you think this confirms my madness, let me say that this is common practice in Chile, and probably elsewhere.

Can't think of anything else to alert you to; February and March Notes covered most of Spring's problems, anyway.

Best regards, as usual,

Andrew Beer.

Help lines – to be used as you wish:

01525 240235 / 07968 277 247