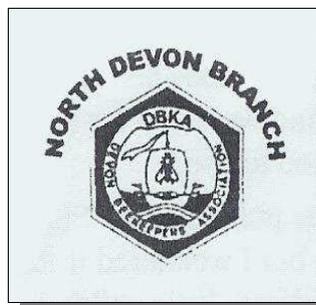


NORTHERN LIGHTS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTH DEVON
BRANCH OF THE DEVON BEEKEEPERS'
ASSOCIATION



July/August 2007

www.northdevonbees.org

Editorial

Well, I hope that this 'interesting' British summer is not depressing you too much and you are coping with being waterlogged!!

You will see that this issue of Northern Lights is a "double" one for July and August. The main reason for this is because there has been a shortage of suitable material to publish. Also, there are problems with printing the newsletter and, until the problem has been resolved, it has been decided to combine the issues to minimise the difficulties. As Editor, I am not on the Branch Committee nor am I responsible for the way in which Northern Lights is printed, but I know the Committee regrets the poor quality of the last two newsletters. As this edition has had to be printed in B&W there are no photos as they simply do not reproduce well enough in B&W. Fingers crossed for the next edition.

There has been quite a lot of media coverage in recent months on bees, hornets and the like. Some of it may be questionable, but I know that you are able to judge for yourselves whether it is or not, rather than have someone tell you what you should or should not believe - freedom of choice! I will continue to include some of the articles - controversial and/or humourous - for your bedtime reading.

And finally! A man driving down the road ran out of petrol. Just at that moment, a bee flew in his window. The bee said, "What seems to be the problem"? "I'm out of petrol." The bee told the man to wait right there and flew away. Minutes later, the man watched as an entire swarm of bees flew to his car and into his petrol tank. After a few minutes, they flew out. "Try it now," said one bee. The man turned the ignition key and the car started right up. "Wow!" the man exclaimed. "What did you put in my petrol tank"? The bee answered, "BP"!

Ed.

'Favourite Colour' Boost for Bees

A bee's favourite colour can help it to find more food from the flowers in its environment, according to research published yesterday. Dr Nigel Raine and Professor Lars Chitka from Queen Mary's School of Biological Sciences, studied 9 bumblebee colonies from southern Germany and found that the colonies that favoured purple bloom were more successful foragers.

Daily Telegraph, 20th June 2007

[Any thoughts on honey bees, folks? Ed]

Bitz4Bees

Now in Stock - 1lb Jars & Lids at £17.00 for 72

- ½lb Jar & Lid at 20p each

Reminder of our Opening times - Tuesdays 12.00 - 13.00 (Noon - 1pm)

Revision Day - Basic Assessment

Seven students and two observers gathered on Sunday 1st July at the Apiary, where Chris Utting and Beryl Smailes had organised a full programme of classroom and practical skills revision for us. Chris had thoughtfully assembled folders for us containing several pamphlets and an overview of the basic course. Beryl attended to our inner needs with copious supplies of tea, coffee and goodies. After some 120 slides and plenty of discussion we broke for a late lunch, keeping an eye on the weather. Fortunately, it stayed dry and we were able to don our bee suits and tackle the practical side of lighting a smoker (without veils) and then getting the roof off one of the Red Zone's student-friendly hives for some handling practice. Chris kept us on our toes with well-directed questions and we challenged him with some of our answers! A quick refresher on constructing a frame, another cup of tea, and a few general queries brought a thoroughly interesting, enjoyable, and informative day to a close. We all appreciated the time and effort both Chris and Beryl put into giving us an excellent foundation for the BIG DAY on Saturday 7th July - Basic Assessment Day.

Ruth Neal

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THE TRIALS of an Invigilator

Chris Utting and Beryl Smailes organized the revision day for our members who, having completed a course during the winter and now half way through their second summer were to take their Basic Assessment. After Tuesday's normal session Chris arranged everything for the following week's exam, a bucket with matches, paper and sawdust for the smokers; on the table, hammer, nails, frames and foundation ready to be assembled under the watchful eye of the assessor. A list of students with telephone numbers if I needed to contact them and a note to say which hives were and more importantly were not to be opened. Everything was in order, nothing left to chance! Unbeknown to both of us was the fact that there was a microscopy course between these days and they would need to move everything and they didn't put it back again. Seeing that Jim Slade has taken over the position of Education Secretary it was agreed that he should be present on the day simply to see how things were organized. I was to attend in the morning and Jim to cover the afternoon. I arrived at 9.10am 20 minutes ahead of schedule only to find one of the assessors, Brian Gant, already waiting, I would have preferred a little time to myself prior to their arrival instead of having to play hostess immediately. I made coffee and we chatted until Sue Hoult, the second assessor arrived looking rather wan and feeling dreadful, with a really bad cold and not quite sure if she would be able to complete the long day ahead. As the students were arriving I took the examiners to the area where the hives were situated. The first thing Brian saw was a hive fallen over, boxes upside down, frames out on the ground and the not too happy bees flying about. Not a good start. I must get the students fitted up first, where are the trays, the hive tools, the smokers, the fuel and most importantly the matches? Up to the top shed looking all round for matches or lighters, in their trays, on the shelves, not a one, back down, has anyone got a lighter? No, then Brian quietly says he has one but he must have it back! Why didn't the ground swallow me up? When they had all gone up to the hives I set about righting the upturned hive, probably pushed over by a badger; I can think of no other explanation. I went back to the shed for a well earned coffee, sat down and then saw under the table the bucket containing fuel and matches! The second set of students arrived and the first set came to make their frames up, the bits were all in a heap on the far bench and at first they couldn't find any bottom bars, we got it sorted eventually and off home they went. During the second viva voce Sue came to tell me that the bees were swarming!! (This is the best apiary in the county?) The swarm eventually settled high in a tree in the inaccessible jungle behind the top shed. Not the place for

little old ladies like me to go with my skep. Jim arrived soon after and being young, tall, dark and handsome he soon located it and had a ladder up the tree, but even he couldn't get the skep close enough to them. I returned to the shed and could hear him on his mobile, "Oh" he said "That was a call to say there is a swarm in the school play area and they want it moved ASAP because children are wanting to go in there" "OK, I will stay here until you get back" He was away a long time and not at all pleased on his return. It was not in the local school as I had thought but at Arlington Court, a very long way from our apiary. The lady who instigated the call had gone home and there was no sign of a swarm anywhere. This kind of behaviour by the general public is one that the Swarm Liaison Team are constantly meeting and is one that needs to be addressed, also the attitude that some people have that we are there to do their bidding! On looking for his swarm he found it had moved about 20yds away into the back hedge, move the ladder, climb another hedge and set up the skep again. At 5-30 I and the Assessors left, Jim still waiting for the swarm to settle, it had been a long, trying day.

AND TRIBULATIONS of a Party Giver

The Pig Roast man Jeff and his partner Carol had spoken to me earlier in the week. Yes, everything was in order, the size of the pig, number of bread rolls, plates, dishes, cutlery, stuffing, apple sauce and the amount of cream. They had visited the apiary and decided where to put their machine and they would bring two gazebos with them to work under. All they needed was access to the electricity by 9-30am. Everything was in order, nothing left to chance! "Think you heard that before." A couple of days before the party we were in BJs - I spotted gazebos and decided on the spur of the moment to buy one. On the Saturday we arrived 20 minutes ahead of schedule at 9.10am, our daughter was with us to help with final arrangements, setting up the bar, arranging the tables and cloths, flowers, water, etc; whilst Ken cleaned the toilet - always a man's job!

10.00am Go to the top shed for the BEE signs to help strangers find the way, as I opened the door the alarm went off, try as I might I could not open the door without shattering the peaceful countryside with its claxon, give up. Ken says he will make some posts when we get home.

10.15am Have a cup of coffee

10.30am Wash up

10.45am Ask Sam at the cottages to ring the Pig Man, they are ex-directory!

11.00am We decide to go home; I am in a complete state of frazzle.

Tribulations (cont'd)

Alongside the cottages at Herner is parked a van "J&C PIGROAST". Our daughter gets out to try and discover what they are doing there instead of the apiary. Just then another white van came around the corner - this is our Pig Man! I still can't believe that two Pig Roasters carry the initials J&C, that they have nothing to do with each other and that they should be operating on the same day less than one mile apart. He too had had a frustrating morning, his van had broken down, he had difficulty getting the pig on the rod, borrowed a smaller van, couldn't get the gazebos in and couldn't find reverse! Every thing turned out fine; a wonderful 70th Birthday, the rain held off, the variety and quality of salads and desserts would have put many hotels to shame and the Pig was absolutely delicious. We raised £435 for charity and I met lots of people and past students whom I haven't seen for years. A great day with many happy memories.

Kay Thomas

The Ultimate Buzz

Hornets are big, terrifying and spreading fast. Climate change has been kind to hornets which can now be found beyond the South-East of England. It used to be said that three hornet stings would kill a man and seven would fell a horse, but these days there's a more politically-correct take on Britain's largest wasp: it is docile. At least that's what nature reserve manager John Tilt was told. Tilt runs Grafton Wood, Worcestershire, and hornets are the reserve's most interesting recent arrival. The wood's first hornet nest appeared in 2003 in a birdnesting box and subsequent years have seen more boxes requisitioned by the insects. To record how a nest grows, Tilt decided to photograph one over the summer of 2005. "They didn't seem to take much notice of me," he says. "They would go about their business and I would take my pictures. When they attacked, it came without any warning." He was, he admits, terrified. "They don't fly around your head like wasps do, they just dive straight at you with their stings up and ready. I was off down the road at 100 miles an hour." He was lucky to get away unharmed, but unfortunately he lost his glasses underneath the nest in his haste. Like wasps, hornets release scent markers when they attack and other colony members take this as a call to arms as soon as they smell it. So, when Tilt went back to rescue his specs, the onslaught began again and Tilt took a hit on the chin. "Believe me, it hurts," he says. "Possibly not more than a wasp's sting at the time, but the pain lasts a lot longer." For hours, in fact. This may not be the best introduction to the news that we seem to be undergoing a hornet population explosion. At the Natural History Museum, staff are used to fielding calls about hornets in the spring, but entomologist Stuart Hine says that this year they have dealt with an unprecedented number of sightings. What people have been seeing are queen hornets. At the end of a summer, all the members of a hornet colony die with the exception of some fertile females, which hibernate. The hornet is essentially the big brother of the common wasp, but where wasps are black and yellow, hornets are twice mellower red-brown and gold. A worker hornet is about

the size of a common worker wasp, while a queen hornet is bigger still - up to 2 inches long. "The queens are formidable insects and people are quite shocked when they find them coming into their homes," says Hine. This year's sightings have been plentiful and early. Recent winters have been kind to the hornet, Hine believes. The result is a population growth that has moved them beyond woodland, their preferred habitat, and into the suburbs where they are more likely to be noticed. With so many sightings reported already, this year looks to be an exceptional one for hornets. A queen has just a few weeks to build a starter nest from chewed wood pulp and eggs. These take about a month to mature into workers, which then take over nest-extension work and food collection. The colony then becomes a hornet factory and in time can house several hundred adults. Workers feed the "family", bringing home a diet of flies, wasps, bees and even butterflies. Look in any textbook written before the turn of this century and it will tell you that hornets are rare outside southern England, but that situation has changed in the past few years. Their arrival in Grafton Wood is part of an advance north and west. That change of fortune is almost certainly due to climate change, says Hine. Worker hornets have been seen flying in December, 2 or 3 months later than they would previously have succumbed to frosts. But rising temperatures should not result in an ever growing hornet population, Hine adds. Milder winters do mean that more queens survive to see spring, but they will face more competition for good nest sites. They are also very sensitive to poor weather. This year's very dry, warm April was ideal, but if they wake to a cold, wet spell they will struggle. Hine insists that hornets are essentially big softies and is excited by the prospect of a summer buzzing with the things. And, despite his own experience, John Tilt shares that enthusiasm. Hornets are, he says, a fascinating addition to life at Grafton Wood, but these days he treats them with rather more respect. "If you are planning to take photos, I recommend that you use a very long lens."

Julian Rollins, Telegraph Weekend; 23rd June 2007

Dates for Your Diary**Apiary Open Day & Visit**

12th August

North Devon Branch AGM

16th September, 1.00 pm,

Horestone Apiary

Eggesford Show

7th October

St Johns Show

27th/28th October

Why Himalayan Balsam is not the Bees Knees!

The UK is home to many non-native species that live happily along side native species without causing a problem. However some species have become 'invasive' and upset the balance of the ecosystem they inhabit by being bigger, faster growing or more aggressive than native species. The Environment Agency published a list of the 'top ten most unwanted foreign species in the UK' in August 2006; Himalayan Balsam is number six. It is an annual herb native to the Western Himalayas and was introduced to Britain in 1839. Unfortunately, it has escaped from gardens and rapidly colonised river banks, shoals in river channels and areas of damp ground. Data from the Biological Records Centre shows Himalayan Balsam now covers much of the UK and is present throughout the Southwest. It flowers from June to October with purplish-pink slipper shaped flowers. It grows in dense stands that suppress the growth of native grasses and other flora. It can grow up to 3m high making it the tallest annual plant in Britain and the banks beneath it become bare and less stable as it has a small and shallow root system. The very reason it is attractive to bees and therefore bee keepers, is one of the reasons it is such a threat to our native flora. The flowers produce more nectar than any native European species making them more attractive to pollinating insects - as a result native species may suffer from less pollination. So, however attractive to bees, Himalayan Balsam's presence is totally unattractive to our ecosystems.

With thanks to the Environment Agency

Swarm Collection

We all have our tales to tell over interesting swarm collections, but for me this has to have been one of the most enjoyable. It was in Barton Town Farm, Challacombe and features a JCB, me, the 84 year old Jim Woollacott, and the very interested Huxtable family. The swarm was high up in a tree, at the edge of the churchyard, adjacent to the farm. As it was before 10am after rain, the bees were quite quiet, with very few scouts started. We used a 50 year old skep, a rope, loppers and fruit bush netting - and a JCB!

Dave James

Assessment Day

I took it as a good omen that 'Assessment Day' fell on a bright sunny morning! In fact it was probably one of the nicest, sunniest days this year so it was a pleasure to drive out to the apiary and spend some time with the bees. I had decided to take the Basic Assessment because I thought that the experience would enable me to learn a bit more about this mystic art of beekeeping - and I was certainly right. Sue Hault, the assessor was a joy to be with. She was very skilled in drawing out those vital facts and anecdotes which illustrate knowledge without revealing my total lack of experience. Despite Chris' careful preparations (thank you for all your hard work, Chris) we still managed to open a hive with a drone laying queen - which of course was a good conversation piece. In fact the practical nature of the assessment took away (most of) the tension from the experience as it felt more like a joint inspection rather than a grilling with Sue prompting with well chosen questions when the need arose. Of course - I don't know yet if I've passed, but it was a worthwhile experience which I'm grateful to the branch for arranging.

Sue Madgwick

Nature's Gifts

Herbs are favoured by a species of wildlife in Cyprus - the honey bee. Honey plays a prominent role in Cyprus cuisine particularly desserts - and, if you keep an eye open, you'll spot wooden hives dotted all around the countryside. The flavours of the honey differ depending on which flower the nectar is taken from. In Cyprus, the bees feed on a wide and varied diet that includes thyme, orange tree blossom, eucalyptus, and mountain heather. Natural honey keeps for a very long time. In fact honeycomb found in the tombs of the Pharaohs that was more than three thousand years old was perfectly edible! A favourite and delicious Cyprus dessert combines yoghurt drizzled with honey and topped with walnuts. A handy tip when measuring honey is to use a greased cup or spoon which will allow the honey to flow freely. Honey can be purchased packed in a variety of different sized and shaped containers, some of which even contain pieces of the honeycomb, providing instant sunshine in a jar!

Beverley Orton Jennings; Sunjet - Cyprus Airways In-Flight Magazine; July/August/September 2007

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