NORTHERN LIGHTS

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

November 2014 www.northdevonbees.org

Chair Chat

We have nearly reached the end of our beekeeping year. Bees are still busy though with pollen being brought in. But the weather could change at any moment. Our Horestone work days were extremely useful, we worked hard and achieved a lot. Thank you.

You should by now have received various emails from Martin reminding you of the various dates to be added to your autumn/winter diary. These include the AGM, our Mince Pie Day on 2nd December (last day at the apiary this year), and the Skittles evening on 5th December.

We hope to see as many of you as possible at the AGM on Sunday 16th November, 2pm at The Castle Centre. Our Branch offers many opportunities to get involved, either as Branch Officers, Committee Members, or any of the many roles that help us to keep the Branch active and healthy.

Beekeeping should be fun – so we need Branch members willing to expand our group of workers – If the work is shared out it will lesson our individual loads, and we can relax and enjoy our beekeeping, both at Horestone and at home.

Sylvie

Events 2014

16 Nov	**14:00-16:00**	**Branch AGM, Castle Centre, Barnstaple**
2 Dec	**12:00 onwards**	**Mince Pie Day, Horestone**
5 Dec	**19:00– 21:30**	**Skittles Evening, Plough Inn, Bickington**

Bee Quotes

'Life is the flower for which love is the honey.'

Victor Hugo

Reminder of Notice of the Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting of the North Devon Branch of the Devon Beekeepers Association will take place at the Castle Centre, 25 Castle Street, Barnstaple on Sunday 16th November at 2 pm.
The meeting will be run according to the Rules that you will find printed in your DBKA 2014 Yearbook, using both the Branch Rules and those of the DBKA as parent organisation. You should note that only Registered and Partner Members are eligible to vote at the AGM.
A Register of Attendance must be signed and a list of eligible members will be available.
Agendas for the meeting will be available at the meeting. A Member wishing to propose any matter for discussion at the Branch AGM, shall notify the Branch Secretary in writing at least 14 days before the meeting in order that it may be placed on the agenda. I shall endeavour to circulate the Agenda to you by e-mail well before the AGM (though obviously not more than 14 days before!).
As at the previous AGM, the following Branch Committee positions shall be elected:
Chairman, Vice Chairman, Branch Secretary, Treasurer, Show & Social Events Co-ordinator, Education & Exam Secretary, 5 Committee Members.

Martin Pollock,
Secretary, North Devon Branch, Devon Beekeepers Association

Topical Tips for November

- Mice are a pest of bee colonies and will attempt to hibernate inside a hive during the Winter. So hive entrances must be protected before the first frosts occur. If the hive entrance is no more than 8-9mm deep the mouse cannot enter but if the entrance is greater than a mouse guard must be fitted. These are usually zinc metal strips 470mm wide and 42mm deep with two rows of circular holes 9mm diameter. The problem is that the holes can get blocked with dead bees during the winter. The guards are fitted using drawing pins pressed in using the side of the hive tool. It helps that the front of the brood box and the floor surfaces are flush. Do not insert a queen excluder between the floor and the brood box as this will dislodge pollen loads from the bee.

- Some beekeepers like to keep their bees well insulated and warm using quilts under the roof. But a warm colony is an active colony that consumes food and increases the risk of starvation in the Spring. So I remove the Varroa floor insert and raise the crown board on a match stick at each corner to provide plenty of through ventilation. This reduces the colony activity, keeping the cluster formation longer and avoids their worst enemy – dampness.

- If you are using solid floors ensure that the whole hive is set up with a forward slope of a few degrees so that any penetrating water will drain away rather than accumulate.

- I keep a heavy house brick on the roof to reduce the risk of the wind blowing the roof off in a Winter gale. I leave the brick on end to remind me if the hive needs attention at the next visit.

- Last Winter we had the highest rainfall since records were kept and I was skating around my hives in the mud slurry. So keep the access path clear ready for another wet winter.

- If woodpecker damage is anticipated the hives can be protected by either wrapping the hive in plastic sheeting that discourages the birds from holding onto the hive side or constructing a lightweight wood frame that surrounds the hive fitted with galvanised chicken wire to prevent access.

Chris Utting

The First Winter Talk on 17 October: 'Let's Hear It for the Boys'

Clare Densley has been the Beekeeper at Buckfast since 2006 and she was the Seasonal Bee Inspector for Devon for two years.

Clare said that she was not an expert but nevertheless she gave a detailed talk about the role and importance of the drone within a honeybee colony. She advocates gentle beekeeping and wishes to promote greater understanding of the often under-rated drone.

Clare said that the drones are not just lazy fellows only waiting around for a virgin queen bee to happen by. Raising drones is 'expensive' in time, as they take 24 days to emerge, and in resources so the worker bees regulate the number of drone cells prepared for the queen. The queen then lays haploid (drone) or diploid (worker) eggs according to the 'wishes' of the workers. When the colony becomes crowded, the queen's pheromone becomes diluted and this leads to more drone cells being prepared and queen cups. Drone brood may amount to 17% - 23%. In poor weather and towards the end of October the workers may cull and expel the drones together with any weak and sick bees. Drones live for 40-90 days. Clare suggested that the colony will be 'happier' when the drones are around and that culling drone brood for varroa control works against the intensions of the workers.

Drones have extra- long antennae enabling acute senses of orientation and smell. They can detect a virgin from 60m. They also have huge eyes and will leave the hive on many occasions to visit congregation areas. The drones do not only return to their mother hive but will 'lodge' with a colony as much as 3km away. This extends their mating area and ensures genetic diversity. Isolated colonies risk inbreeding.

Drones contribute to the work within the hive by accepting nectar when there is a flow and by maintaining the temperature around the brood. They do feed themselves, generally from the outer combs and, of course, they principle role is to mate with a virgin queen. Only one mating per male as the drones die following passing his sperm to the queen.

Clare was thanked for making the long journey in poor weather and for giving a thought-provoking, beautifully illustrated and informative talk.

Clare conclude her talk by recommending the film 'More Than Just Honey'.

Mave Dowling

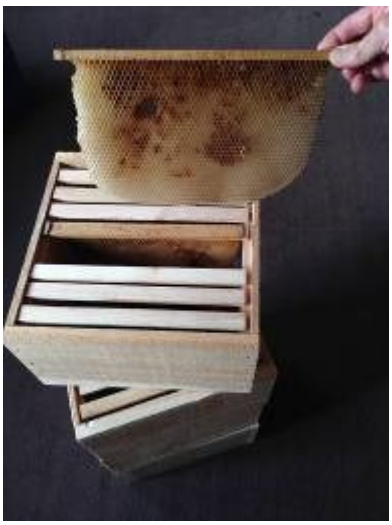
Let them bee

Before Notting Hill became desirable, before London was even thought of, before any human made any structure, bees lived in trees. For millions of years a defendable cavity in a rotting stump was their accommodation of choice. How they managed without us for so long is a mystery, but we finally came along with our sweet teeth. And destroyed bee colonies for their honey and their fat-and-protein-rich larvae. For thousands of years.

By 1852 most of us were well over our penchant for wriggly grubs when American Rev. Langstroth patented a hive system that allowed the beekeeper to not only harvest honey without killing all the bees in the process, but also to manipulate them to maximise honey production. And no tree climbing. It's a system the honey industry still uses today, and it's all about the beekeeper. Think battery farming.

Now we're coming to realise that we might be able to do without our honey, but we can't do without the pollination service bees provide. Not just in the almond valleys of California where bees are fork-lifted in by the billions from all over the USA for the few weeks of the blossom, and then fork-lifted out again before they die of starvation when the blossom's over. We need them globally, constantly. And they're having a hard time right now. Ask the bee brokers who make their living coordinating bees for the almonds.

So how can we help? Wind the clock back? Let trees rot, form cavities and leave the bees alone? Or if we haven't the forests or the patience, make bee boxes to give them rent-free homes and let them keep all their honey? Thousands of us already put bird boxes in our gardens in the hope of occupancy but without any expectation of eggs. Or maybe we could co-exist more kindly – honey is so delicious, and the bees often make more than they need…



On my London rooftop I have five People's Hives, a system devised by a French clergyman Abbé Warré (1867-1951) to be simple, economical and bee-friendly. And it's a lot less work for the beekeeper than conventional, commercial hives.

In the wild, bees start building comb from the top of their tree cavity, and work downwards to fill it. The queen prefers to lay her eggs in brand new comb that bees make from snow-white wax they squeeze out of special glands. She can lay her own bodyweight in eggs every day for months – for an 8 stone woman giving birth to a healthy 8 pounder that's 14 babies a day! As the queen works downwards and young bees hatch out of the comb above her, the uppermost comb is used to store spare honey to feed the colony in the flower-free winter. The People's Hive is a simple series of identical boxes with wooden bars at the top which politely suggest to the bees where they might conveniently start building their comb – no compulsion, the bees are wild animals and will do what they like!

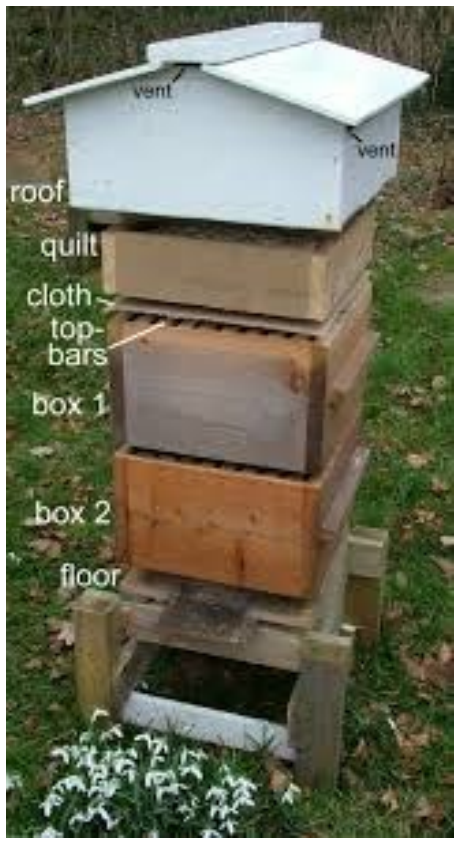


Photo by David Heaf

They follow their natural instinct to build comb downwards, and when they get near the bottom of a box, the beekeeper lifts the whole hive up and shoves another empty box underneath. The bees are briefly interrupted in their comb building at the junctions between boxes, but quickly discover the spaces between the new set of wooden bars, and carry on building downwards from those new wooden bars into the next box. And so on. It's like a wild hive but articulated every 8 inches vertically.

Actually, if there is enough honey to spare at the top of the hive, the beekeeper can remove the top box - full of honey - without destroying the hive, or even inconveniencing the bees much. Apart from stealing some of their winter fuel allowance, obviously. Very great care has to be taken to weigh the hive before harvesting to make sure that the bees will have more than enough honey to see them through the winter. Experienced beekeepers can tell by "hefting" – lifting a corner of the hive and judging its weight. I use a pulley and luggage scales in a hoisting arrangement which is characteristically urban, if a little

Chim chim cher-re oo:

And having established that there is enough spare honey to harvest, before I actually take it I give an undertaking to each hive that I will monitor them over the winter, and at the first sign of any shortage, I will feed their honey back. It's only a verbal undertaking from a mad hippy, but there are a lot of witnesses.

Otherwise I pretty much leave them to their own devices. I bought bees for my first hive, and now have four more – all from wild swarms that voluntarily moved into empty People's Hives I made available.

Imagine your mortgage lender insisted on structurally checking your home by taking the roof off and lifting out all the internal walls. They put everything back and give you the OK, but the furniture's in the wrong place and you have to replaster and repaint all the joins. It can take bees as much as two days work to repair after a beekeeper inspects their hive this way, and some inspect every week. There's a lovely old book "At The Hive Entrance" by H Storch which describes itself as an Observation Handbook: "How to know what happens inside the hive by observation on the outside" Sitting for hours watching the diagnostic minutiae of the bees coming and going is simultaneously fascinating, humbling and zen. My kind of beekeeping.

Bill Anderson

I saw this article in 'The Idler' magazine and thought it might provoke some discussion. I contacted Bill Anderson who kindly agreed to me using it and added some more info: he makes sure the hives are well insulated with wool; 2" on the walls and 8" on the roof. This gives the hive a thermal resistance of R8. compared with an uninsulated wooden hive with a thermal resistance of R1. Studies in the USA have found that feral hives have a range between R5 and R15. Bill's hives are on a roof with no shade or shelter hence the insulation keeps the hive cooler in the summer and warmer in winter. I asked Bill how he copes with varroa and he replied:

'*The varroa mite is one of the most brilliantly successful parasites. Honeybees will have to co-exist with this parasite to survive. Chemical treatments are the stuff of King Canute. They're trying to kill a bug on a bug. If the human upscale of the mite on a larva is the equivalent to a cat preying on a human child, how would we feel about using a cat-killing gas in a confined space with the child? I tried using strateolaelaps - the mite that the reptile keepers introduce to eat their parasitic mites, but the conditions in the hive don't equate with strateolaelaps natural environment so it's difficult to make them permanent residents and part of the ecosystem of the hive - a pity, as they can destroy 10 varroa a day and don't harm the bees. Even if they did move in permanently, they would only tilt the balance in the bees favour, never eradicate the mite. I hear the pseudo scorpion might be more hopeful, but in the meantime my only active treatment is to insulate the hives: varroa thrive just below 35C - in cold spots, and the insulation helps eliminate those - a small tilt in favour of the bees, who I'm sure will ultimately evolve anti-varroa hygienic habits. Till then I think we just have to accept losses. Really hard when, like me and so many other beginners, you've only got one hive and its chances are 50%.*

Like all organisms bees' resistance to all disease is improved the better their baseline health. I think an insulated Warre hive goes a long way to help generally.'

Jeff

Edited by Jeff Orr, e-mail jeffjorr@aol.com. The views expressed in the articles are the author's and not necessarily those of the North Devon Branch of the Devon Beekeepers' Association.

Member's contributions are extremely welcome: by 23rd of the month prior to publication please.