

SEVENOAKS AND TUNBRIDGE WELLS BEEKEEPERS BRANCH NEWSLETTER JULY 2020

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Devastating Fire for Peter Hutton



Peter tries to take stock of the damage to his equipment

On Saturday 13th June, at five minutes past midnight, my phone rang and the first of my three neighbours advised me my barn was alight and blazing and the fire brigade had been called. We dressed, jumped in the car, and drove the five miles to the farm. Seven people had rung for the fire service. The first call was from a retained fireman a mile away, who saw the glow in the sky from his bedroom window and went to investigate.

When we arrived, ten minutes after being called, the first pump was already on site, a second had arrived and stopped in the gateway and a third was down the road at a hydrant. Hoses were rolled out and, for two-and-a-half hours, water was hosed onto the site. It was not the barn that was ablaze but the polytunnel, where I had all my wax-making machinery, 760 kilos of beeswax and more than 20 kilos of foundation, two saw benches, a compressor and hundreds of pounds' worth of tools and other stuff.

I never expected such a disaster, only the previous day I had recovered some five litres of wax from old combs and put foundation into 12 brood frames and 20 shallow frames.



Everything in the polytunnel was destroyed

Even hives outside the tunnel were burnt and all the surrounding trees scorched to their very tops. We have a lovely tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), which had been full of bees during the daytime as it was in full bloom but was now absolutely scorched black. A colony of bees in a polystyrene hive melted somewhat. I transferred them into a wood hive the next day; they were previously docile but now are not so.

This could not have happened at a worse time, right in the middle of the main honey flow. Robin Toop has loaned me eight supers of drawn comb, which has helped. Vic Webb has also helped by providing some 30 photographs of the tools lost. I shall restart in due course but no longer have any stock of beeswax so will be needing wax, including old combs, as I will replace the machines to recover and produce foundation. I will be happy to receive any combs in need of rendering and to purchase any rendered wax.

To finish this sorry saga our 15-year-old collie, Fennel, was put down Tuesday 23rd June following a stroke.

Peter Hutton, Branch President (Pictures by Vic Webb)

Asian Hornet Success

Congratulations to Maggie Speirs on passing the Asian Hornet assessment and joining our Asian Hornet team. Just a reminder for everyone that if you think you have spotted an Asian Hornet, you can find your nearest contact through the BBKA website for help and advice: www.bbka.org.uk/asian-hornet-action-team-map

Liz Birchenough



Waiting for a Swarm?

We had a record 35 people on the swarm request list this year and, so far, we have supplied 24, so apologies to the remaining 11. Because of lockdown we reduced our mileage by supplying those nearest to where the swarm was collected. Also, you will surely understand we have no control over the number of swarms we are made aware of in the Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells area or even if they are retrievable or within reach of our 5m pole! Some even abscond when we go back in the evening to collect the flying scout bees, like this huge swarm at a Bessels Green property. I captured it at 11am in my skep and, as the bees were going to take a while to fully assemble, I asked the owner to contact me when they were all inside. This she did at 2pm but when I came to collect them half an hour later, they had already decided the skep was too small and absconded! Unfortunately, swarming is usually over by early July so, fingers crossed we get calls to retrieve a few more in these remaining days.

John Farrow, Swarm co-ordinator

Vic Webb has settled swarms for sale at £100 each and will donate the greater portion to the Branch. Email: vw@wigg.co.uk

In the Apiary: July to December

This is a time when your bees are at their busiest; the numbers in the hive should be reaching 60,000 and, within a week, will rise to 70,000. In terms of a national hive this means two standard brood boxes or one 14 x 12, a queen excluder and as many as six supers of honey. Perhaps you have already had to extract at least two supers to make room and to keep your colony from swarming. You may have also produced a nucleus to prevent a swarm issuing.

There are still eight new beekeepers looking to start with a swarm, if you are among them then you might want to buy one of the swarms which Vic Webb has hived. There will yet be a few more swarms flying away from those inexperienced beekeepers who, unfortunately, have not had the benefit of learning at our branch apiaries this year because of Covid-19.

If you have ordered a Nucleus from one of the many traders and it is not available within the next ten days, then it will be too late to build up to survive the Winter. You could either ask for your money back or for delivery in the first week of May next year. If you receive it later you cannot expect it to build up for Winter without feeding. You must bear in mind that nature demands the queen should sharply reduce her egg laying from mid-July through August. From September, she will be laying at a much lower rate sufficient only to build the number of bees to survive the quiescent period from mid-November onwards.

Workers live only six weeks, maximum; those emerging through September and November survive through the Winter beyond that six-week period simply because they do not feed brood and therefore delay that six week clock. They remain, as it were, in semi-hibernation.

Those of you who enjoy the natural world will have noticed the climate changes over the past 10 or 15 years and how plants have flowered and fruited earlier and earlier. The blackberries are a good example, already well advanced in June.

Peter Hutton, Branch President

A Day in the Life of a Swarm Collector

Words and Pictures by John Farrow



I was rung at 9.30 am about this swarm in an apple tree just down the road from me. I usually ask people to send me a picture but, as it was nearby I hot-footed down with just a skep and a white sheet to lay on the ground below. The bees fell into the skep quite easily and I left them upturned for the strays to assemble inside but, because of the size, I was concerned that they might abscond.

Therefore, I returned with a nucleus and dropped them in and rotated the disc so that the queen excluder covered the entrance. I reasoned that if the queen couldn't escape they should all still be there when I returned at dusk after all the flying bees had come back. Or so I thought! Unknown to me, in rotating the disc so that the queen excluder section was covering the entrance, it had loosened the screw

slightly; enough, it turned out, for the queen to squeeze underneath. When I returned at 9.30 pm, all the bees were covering the front and partway round the sides of the nucleus with none inside! So, what to do as I couldn't load them into the car? The only recourse was to knock them back onto the sheet, cover them with the skep and hurriedly wrap them in the sheet, all in the half dark.

The next morning, 90% of them were still wrapped in the skep but I was left to deal with the escapees who were all over the inside of the car. One thing is certain: it's impossible to capture flying bees, so all I could do was drive with all the windows and tailgate open and hope to suck most of them out!!

The next problem was what to do with the captured bees that might or might not have a queen? I decided to hive them at my apiary with a queen excluder underneath the brood box, to try to discover whether there is evidence of a laying queen. Beekeeping is so much fun – isn't it?

