

SEVENOAKS AND TUNBRIDGE WELLS BEEKEEPERS BRANCH NEWSLETTER MARCH 2021

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Acrobatic Bees

March is the critical month for bees; if the weather is warm, nectar and pollen will be produced in abundance and the older bees will be working hard collecting. The queen increases her egg laying as the younger bees increase the output of royal jelly. Another month and supers will be needed. In the meantime, it might still be necessary to add some candy; the brood has to be kept at a steady 34C. Winter stores may well be used up, especially since early February saw temperatures drop below zero to -5C during the snow and ice.



February 20th was a real Spring day and at 11am the bees emerged in vast numbers for a cleansing flight. I walked around the farm looking at the snowdrops and crocuses; the bees were queuing up to collect pollen from the crocuses, while those visiting the snowdrops were like acrobats, upside down. Now the temperature is climbing, daffodils are flowering whilst the crocuses collapse directly after pollination.

Alder is providing pollen and goat willow flowers are just forming up to open in the next week. Goat or pussy willow (*Salix caprea*) really does give good quantities of both pollen and nectar; it advances egg laying along with brood production.

Colony Losses

In recent weeks, I have watched several webinars. Celia Davis from Sussex gave a very well presented talk on honey, in particular from oil seed rape, a plant that suffers from flea beetle. Neonicotinoid treated seed was the answer to the beetle problem but since the ban on these pesticides it has become far more difficult to produce a decent crop. She gave the example of one field of two acres producing a decent small crop in 2020 while a 60-acre field was a complete failure. This problem occurred across the country so most growers have dropped this crop for 2021. Celia did her own research by reading farming magazines and talking to growers. She found that farmers, who in normal years produced 2.5 to 4 tonnes per hectare could exceed 7 tonnes per hectare with one crop under different management.

Ulster Beekeepers Association held some very interesting webinars. I am hearing of winter losses and have lost six colonies out of 60 myself. I always leave a number untreated for Varroa in order to see how long they survive in my search for tolerance; these colonies are tested each year for Varroa load. One of these colonies died recently as did last summer's swarm from this particular colony. There was honey left in both hives. I have yet to draw a conclusion: was there a problem with the new queen in the parent colony or was the old lady not superseded? I thought back to the UBKA webinars I had watched and wondered if Jeff Pettis could hold the key with the problem of unviable sperms in the queen's spermatheca.

Hidden Queens

This year neither packages, nuclei nor colonies of live bees can be imported into the UK. Queens with a limited number of attendants will be allowed under strict rules with prices varying from £30 to £80. Beginners, and even those with four or five years' experience, often lose swarms without realising. The first indication is that there are no eggs, larvae or pupa, they then waste money on buying a queen which, when introduced, will be killed. What a waste! There should be a virgin queen in the colony but if she is a dark colour she can be difficult to see since she will be hardly larger than the workers and quick to hide when the hive is disturbed. The existence of a queen is simple to prove: put a frame containing eggs into the presumed queenless hive and emergency cells will be started within a couple of days. It may be three weeks before a virgin queen mates; her spermatheca contains a clear fluid that must be displaced by semen within 28 days before that fluid solidifies and she becomes a drone layer.

Peter Hutton, Branch President

Time to Think about Swarming

We already have five names on the '2021 SWARM REQUEST LIST'. So, for those who may have lost bees over the winter and would like to replace them with a swarm, please send your **name, address, landline and mobile numbers** by email to John Farrow at: stweditor@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk

For more complete details go to our website or click on: <https://www.sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk/swarm-request-list/>
John Farrow

Sweetness and Light

We were taken on an entertaining trip through the history of man and bees during our February Zoom talk. Julia Piggott, who runs a nature reserve in Cumbria, used a series of images to show the interaction of humans and bees from the earliest times. Her talk mentioned Saint Ambrose, the patron saint of beekeepers, took in Napoleon's use of the bee as a symbol of power and went on to demonstrate how once highly-prized beeswax has become a by-product of honey. Julia also told us that the expression 'fairies at the bottom of the garden' could be traced back through literature to being a reference to drone congregation areas. So, perhaps some of us have got fairies at the end of the garden after all. Julia ended by saying that she has become concerned about honey bees being so effective that they out-compete bumble bees and solitary bees. She said that she was reducing her honeybee colonies to just two because she was worried about the future for other species of bee.

Mary Staffurth

Helping Bees to Stay Healthy

Have you ever wondered how BBKA spends your subscription? Well apart from all the regular stuff such as insurance and publications, BBKA supports a number of bee related scientific research projects. On February 27th, the scientists running the current projects presented their work to BBKA members via Zoom. This is a very brief summary of the meeting.

Hannah Samson (Leicester University) has been looking at the effect of atmospheric pollution on bees. She has been using bumble bees rather than honey bees because bumbles are easier to handle but are still a good model for honey bees. Her main interest is the effect of particle pollution, in particular carbon particles, which arise from combustion of fossil fuels. I am sure you have heard how important a good mix of healthy gut bacteria is to humans, well surprisingly, the same applies to bees. Hannah found that bees which have ingested carbon particles have a significantly reduced colonisation of healthy gut bacteria, in particular *Snodgrassella alvi*, which is the most common healthy bacteria found in bees. This has the direct effect of reducing the ability of bees to fight off infections, thus leading to less healthy bees. However, there is a more sinister implication, which is her next topic for investigation. She believes the ingested carbon particles may impact the way genes are expressed. The implications of this are worrying, as it could be responsible for reproductive problems. This does of course raise questions about the use of smoke by beekeepers, but this is yet to be explored.

Weedkillers

Phil Donkersley (Lancaster University) has been researching the use of agri-chemicals in the municipal and domestic arenas. In the agricultural arena, use of insecticides, herbicides and fungicides are closely regulated. Farmers must record what they use, where and when. This does not apply to us as members of the public. We can buy anything available from the garden centre and use it without restriction. Most people don't read the manufacturers' guidance on the package, not least because it is often written in pale grey on white in microscopic type. The same goes for municipal bodies, who hire contractors to keep paths, parks and parking areas weed free. There is no record kept of where the sprays have been used. Phil is collecting samples of wax and honey from a wide range of locations, urban, suburban and rural to see what chemicals he can detect in the honey, and see how this varies. His aim is to be able to prove whether the chemical burden in urban and suburban areas is significant, and a cause of harm to pollinators.

Where the Bee Sucks

Nick Balfour (Sussex University) has been working on something completely different. We all know from experience what the bees tend to forage on in our local areas, but it seems there is no single comprehensive database to collate the thousands of records on this topic. Nick is building DoPI, the database of plant/insect interactions. This is a huge information processing task where the records of insects visiting plants is recorded by plant and insect type, location and date. The idea is that it will be much easier to get an accurate idea of the ideal plant mix for your location. Over time, it will also be able to show an increase or decrease of interactions, demonstrating whether planting schemes have been effective.

Liz Birchenough

In the Path of the Storm



This photo shows a close shave for two of my hives, courtesy of Storm Christoph. If the cherry tree had not snagged in the branches of the oak on the left, both hives would have been flattened.

David London

Nuclei for Sale

I expect to have a couple of overwintered nucs for sale, with marked 2020 queens. If anyone is interested, they are welcome to call David London on 07825 276060

Beekeeping Supplies

John Hendrie is still able to supply Thornes Beekeeping Equipment on advantageous terms for branch members. With the current lockdown you must pre-order and agree a collection time. For some orders, he may be able to deliver. Contact John on 01732 833894 or bibba26@talktalk.net

Greenhouse Needs a Home

One of our members has a 6 x 8 greenhouse he needs to remove. If anyone has any use for this they are welcome to have it. The glass needs replacing but otherwise it is complete. Contact Tim on tim_p_harris@hotmail.com

Getting Ready at Hilbert Road

Both the bee house and large shed have now been painted. The large sink containing stagnant water has been emptied and part refilled with sand and shingle and the down pipes from the beehouse have been diverted into the surrounding greenery. The water cascade is working.

Seven National hives are in position containing strong colonies of bees, which are taking in pollen on flying days. I have spent a lot of time flaming, scraping and wire-brushing large amounts of equipment as well as filling frames with new wax foundation. I completely cleaned out the beehouse of its contents, mainly consisting of WBC brood boxes and WBC supers. There is now one complete WBC brood box and super in the bee house facing out through the bee entrance ready to receive bees.

Huw is helping me to carry out some repairs around the main window of the large shed. Chris Murphy and I are dealing with the re-felting of the main shed.

Vic Webb, Hilbert Road Apiary Manager

Congrats

In case you missed the mention in BBKA News, our vice-chairman, John Hendrie, has been elected President of the National Honey Show. He is the only person to have been president of the BBKA and also president of the National Honey Show.

On the Web

Go to our website for more on bees and beekeeping: <http://www.sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk/>
Among the topics are this year's 'Virtual' BBKA Spring Convention. Click here for more details:
<https://www.sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Spring-Convention-eR2-Feb-2021.pdf>

Branch Honey for Sale



Sevenoaks Honey from our Barrwood apiary is almost sold out so you need to be quick if you want to buy some jars. They are £5 each for a 12oz jar. Luckily, we had a bigger honey harvest at Hilbert Road, so there is still Tunbridge Wells Honey available. This is bottled in 1lb jars, costing £6.50 each.

To buy, contact Liz Birchenough:
membership@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk

Diary Dates

Tuesday 16 March at 7.30pm via Zoom - Andrew Durham: Asian Hornet; lessons from the French experience. Are we in danger of ceasing to be vigilant for the Asian Hornet? Andrew will explain the factors affecting its success across Europe and offer advice on what beekeepers can do to manage bees under predation.

Tuesday 13 April at 7.30pm via Zoom - Celia Davis: Beekeeper v Bee: How our activities as beekeepers impact on the natural life of the honeybee colony.

Send pictures or items for the newsletter to marystaffurth@yahoo.com