

March 2025 Report from Fermanagh Beekeepers Association

The beginning of March, with its glorious colour in gardens, hedgerows and fields, was welcomed by all of us, even if the wind blew chilly around our beehives. Most beekeepers were anxious to see inside of their hives and the month did afford a few days of bright sunshine, with less wind, when some opened up for a quick check to ensure that there were still bees present. When the ambient temperature rises sufficiently, full checks can be carried out but this is not a good idea in March as the brood nest can be cooled considerably and with fewer bees, it is difficult for the bees to get it back to the approximate 35°C appropriate for brood rearing. There should always be a purpose which will be of benefit to the colony before it is opened at any time of year but even more so at this time of year.



Bee on pussy willow



Unseasonable swarm

We are often asked when should we carry out our first full inspection. The answer is, of course, dependent on the weather! My grandfather always said the flowering currant should be in bloom but in these times of climate change that could be late February so current advice would be to wait until it is possible to move about outdoors in short sleeves. This inspection is an ideal time to find the queen, clip and mark her, as there are fewer bees present and few, if any, drones in the colony.

There are many beekeepers who find it impossible to spot the queen. Have all equipment for queen marking to hand, that is, a queen cage and a working (test it) marker pen and scissors if you intend to clip her wing, one third of one wing being sufficient. Don't leave the marker pen in the sun as when you come to use it, the liquid will be thinner and you could give her a bath instead of a dot on the thorax! To make finding the queen easier, and it's also good practice, all actions should be carried out as gently as possible, from the approach to the hive, lifting off the roof, EASING off the crown board which will be stuck down with propolis (bee glue) and the removal of the dummy board and a couple of the back frames to give room for

working on the frames with brood in them. The back frames will, usually, have stores in them – no brood. Make finding the queen your main task and use as little smoke as possible. Gently move frames to the back of the hive until the first brood is reached, when each frame will be looked at, scanning first the side which faces away from you as the queen will often move to the ‘dark’ side – remember she spends all her working life in the dark. Look for anything which is different. The queen is bigger than the workers and there should be few drones to be confused with her by size. She moves differently too and will have a tendency to disappear through any holes in the foundation. Any bees obstructing vision can be moved gently using your fingers, not the hive tool which is hard, sharp and cold and does not lend itself to sensitivity. She will usually be found on a frame with open brood rather than capped brood. She has no reason to be on capped brood. Her job is to lay eggs and for that she needs frames with empty cells. Scan the frames rather than peer closely at them until this ‘something different’ is suspected, then check closely. Once she is spotted don’t take your eyes off her as she can disappear in a flash and trap her in the queen cage for marking. There are many other jobs to be done in this first inspection but if you know the queen is unmarked, make this your first task.

Once the queen is marked, the number of frames of brood should be noted and ask yourself if the brood pattern is satisfactory. It should have few, if any, empty cells and show signs of having been laid in a concentric pattern over the frames. The brood nest is spherical or perhaps slightly oval, in shape and the seams between the frames are part of this pattern. Examine the cappings to make sure that they are smooth and evenly coloured. At this time of year they may be quite yellow from the dandelion pollen going into hives. If a capping is ‘different’ use a toothpick (useful in everyone’s bee box) to open it up to look at what is inside. More often than not, it will show signs of chalk brood but it could auger something more sinister. Look closely at the brood itself to see that it is healthy with creamy coloured larvae lying in a ‘c’ shape in the cell. Older larvae will fill the cells and it should be easy to see the segmentation. If the larvae doesn’t look healthy or if the cappings are suspect, samples should be sent to AFBI. Indeed, samples of 30 freshly dead bees from each hive should be sent for testing every spring and autumn. There is no point in trying to work with unhealthy bees.



'Manky' frame

While going through the hive, scrape the propolis which has built up over winter from the ends of the frames and the sides of the brood box where the frames rest. This is fiddly and time consuming but it will save time during subsequent examinations. Also clean any brace comb into a lidded bucket for dealing with at a latter date. Any frames which are black as a result of numerous successions of brood rearing or are damaged or look generally 'manky', should be moved to the back of the hive for replacement at the next inspection or perhaps, if the beekeeper is well prepared, now.

When the inspection is completed, use the dummy board to close the frames together as tightly as possible to prevent either the build up of more brace comb or the addition of excess of propolis and to help keep the bee space accurate. Finally, note in the hive records all findings so that you can see easily what you need for the second inspection and you can also assess the progress that the colony is making.

This is an impressive amount of work to be done and demonstrates why warmer weather is needed before an effective first inspection.

In March, the Bee Health Workshops were held in three venues in Ulster. These are sponsored by the Ulster Beekeepers Association and are always valuable in bringing beekeepers up to date with the latest developments as regards the health of colonies. This year, Jack Siberrard, Senior Bee Inspector from England, was the lecturer and he spoke of two exotic threats which will devastate our honeybees if they arrive in Ireland, the Asian or yellow legged hornet and the Tropilaelaps mite. The hornet is already present in England and

its control is time and labour consuming. While it's life cycle is similar to that of our native wasps, the numbers in individual nests are much greater. It is larger than our wasps but not as large as the wood wasp and it has no ovipositor. It can be brought to Ireland in imported fruit cargoes or indeed, as a strong flier and with favourable winds, fertilised queens can reach here. It carries danger in that it is carnivorous and will attack all insects, that is, all our pollinators, including honey bees. We know our insect populations are already under threat and it is up to everyone, not only beekeepers, to make themselves familiar with the appearance of the hornet (good photographs can be found on the internet) and to report it to the NIEA Non Native Species Team on 028 9056 9629.

Tropilaelaps mite has recently made its way into eastern Europe and, as a relative of the *Varroa* destructor mite, it is only a matter of time before it spreads across the whole Continent. It is even more devastating than *Varroa* and much more research on its lifecycle is needed before effective measures for its control can be developed. Treatments have been used but they need to be applied more often than that for *Varroa*, making beekeeping much more time-consuming. It can be spread by the movement of colonies or packages of honeybees or of queens so it is essential that no beekeeper in Ireland imports bees into the country. This is one more reason to be added to the list, already containing the danger of small hive beetle from Europe as well as the danger to our native Irish bee, of why the importation of honeybees should be made illegal in Northern Ireland as well as in the Republic of Ireland.

The next meeting of Fermanagh Beekeepers Association will be held in Fermanagh House Enniskillen on Thursday April 24th at 8.00pm. The speaker will be Mark Wallace on the topic 'Swarming'. This will be a very important topic as we strive to prevent our bees from swarming, which reduces the productivity of our colonies, makes more work for beekeepers and causes worry to the general public, so we would urge as many as possible, especially those relatively new to beekeeping, to attend and avail of Mark's expertise and to ask all the questions lurking at the backs of our minds. Everyone, member or non-member will be welcome.