

February 2023. Report from Fermanagh Beekeepers' Association.



Figure 1: Bees on Spring Crocus



Figure 2: Bee among spring heather

February, my least favourite time of the year, has been a month full of promise with the advent of yellow and white, followed by blue, crocuses, striking daffodils, scent from daphne, the yellow of forsythia replacing that of witch hazel, spring heathers, the ever reliable pulmonaria and the frogs arriving in the pool five days earlier than in 2022! In the surrounding fields, the whins are showing ever more colour and are being visited by our honeybees as evidenced by the deep orange pollen being carried into our hives. The first queen bumble bees have joined the honeybees searching for the all-important pollen and nectar. It is at this time of year when one of the differences between the bumble bees and honeybees is most clear. Honeybees overwinter as part of a colony with plenty of food in the nest whereas bumble bee queens spend winter in nests of their own making and in solitary. When they emerge in spring, the priority is to build up their bodily reserves with nectar and pollen. When a queen is strong enough she will lay her first small batch of eggs and when they hatch to larvae, she herself will gather nectar and pollen to provision them. These are the queens which we are seeing (admittedly only a few) at the moment. Their offspring, the worker bumble bees, are smaller and will eventually take over the foraging duties, leaving the queen free to perform her main duty, that of laying the eggs to expand the size of her colony.

As beekeepers we are moving into a very busy and, hopefully, productive time. We must establish plans, practices and routines which will help us to manage our bees as easily as possible throughout the coming months. Some will already have had a first look into their hives (I hesitate to call it an examination) but all of us will have read the signs outside the hive and will have an idea of what will be found on opening it.

Importantly, have your preferred method of recording the findings in the hive ready to be filled in. Each record card should have the essential headings – queen present and laying, queen cells present?, any signs of disease, amount of stores, a means of judging whether the colony is expanding at an appropriate rate and has it enough room for expansion. It is also a good idea to have room to add any other observations which might also be useful for your subsequent inspections and if you are planning to rear queens, your record card become more comprehensive. In preparing for this first inspection, remember that the colony may be in need of feeding or conversely, may need food frames to be removed to give the queen room to lay so spare frames of

foundation, preferably drawn, will be needed to replace them. There may also be frames showing signs of mould which will need replacing.

Queens may not be marked or clipped so have the equipment for that to hand. This is an ideal time to find the queen as there are fewer bees in the colony and there are no drones to catch the eye as being larger than worker bees. She will most likely be found on a frame with new eggs or open larvae so concentrate efforts on these frames first, moving to other frames if unsuccessful. It is not usually difficult to find a queen if you approach it with a positive attitude. You are looking for something different, both in appearance and movement. She often moves to the darkness in the hive so look at the 'dark' side of the frame first. Scan the frame, starting from the sides and moving in a circle into the middle, paying special attention to any holes in the wax through which she may move to the other side. That 'something different' will catch your eye and Hey presto – success! This is when the catching and marking equipment should be close by so that you don't have to take your eyes off her to get it. When you manage to find her once, it is easier each time.

You should take a sample of bees for testing for disease to send to the Entomology Department of the Agri Food and Biological Institute, New Forge Lane, Belfast – more equipment.

Floor boards should be cleaned although a strong colony of bees on an open mesh floor will generally have a spotless floor. The easiest way to manage the floor boards is to have a clean one with you, use it to replace the first floor board, clean the first one removed and have it ready for the second hive etc. Floor board replacement should be done first as the brood box need not be disturbed. Have a couple of queen excluders with you (equipment again) Remove the roof as usual and place the queen excluder diagonally on it, lift the brood box, place it on the spare queen excluder (saves worry about the queen falling down) replace the old floor, move the brood box back on top of it and check the queen excluder to see that the queen is not on it.

Carry out a normal inspection with all the biosecurity measures being obeyed but be prepared to remove a lot of brace comb which will probably contain ivy honey so have a lidded bucket with you so that no honey comb is left lying in the apiary. Pay special attention to the condition of the brood at all stages for foul broods by shaking all the bees from each frame, taking care of the queen, so that it is possible to see anything different about the open larvae and capped larvae and take the sample of 30 bees for analysis.

When closing the brood chamber, be sure to tighten the frames together with leverage on the dummy board. This will cut down on the amount of propolis which the bees will use to fill any tiny space between the frame lugs and will make later inspections easier for the beekeeper.

Be aware that you may need to add a super above a queen excluder to give more room for the rapidly increasing number of bees. At this time of year they do not need it for the storage of nectar. Different beekeepers will use different rules of thumb but my own is to put a super on if the bees are covering seven frames in the brood chamber.

This probably does not cover all that needs to be done but hopefully it will guide newer beekeepers and remind the more experienced. All this will take time, especially if the queen had to be found, marked and clipped so choose the day with care. Above all, enjoy being in contact with the bees again!

At the February meeting of Fermanagh Beekeepers' Association, Thomas McCaffrey, mentor for the Lakelands Queen Rearing Group, gave a comprehensive account of the aims of the group and its activities, during the summer of 2022, in reaching the goals set for it by the Native Irish Honeybee Society (NIHBS) who sponsored the activities of all of the groups working throughout Ireland. He had kept a record of the numbers of virgin queens raised from eggs laid by an *apis mellifera mellifera* queen and the number subsequently mated in the home apiaries of the group members and he will endeavour to check the number of queens which have overwintered to head their colonies this

spring. Thomas highlighted instances where methods had been improved or changed to ensure greater success. He also told the Association that black queen cell virus had been suspected and samples were sent to AFBI, who confirmed it. This was a disease new to those who had not been involved with queen rearing before as the virus is fed to the developing queen larvae by nurse bees who carry the virus without suffering any effects. There were sessions during the summer when the numbers of queens being produced dropped with the group being unable to find an explanation but it is hoped that the lessons learned in 2022 can be applied in 2023 as the group continues its learning journey.

The members of the 'Introduction to Beekeeping' class of 2022 who were at the meeting were presented with their Open College Network NI certificates of achievement and UBKA bronze lapel pins by their Tutor, Jackie Barry. Jackie congratulated them on their perseverance in coming to terms with the use of the internet in submitting their written work for assessment as well as the high level of skill shown at the practical sessions. She thanked the members of the Association who had attended assessor training provided by OCN NI and had helped with the practical examinations. 2022 saw the first cohort of students attend this course which was devised by the UBKA Education Team with the help of Cafre and with OCN NI as the awarding body.

The next meeting of Fermanagh Beekeepers' Association will be on March 30th 2023 at 8.00pm in Fermanagh House. At it, the progress of the research being carried out on honeybees in University College, Dublin will be given by those carrying out the work. As some of our members have contributed bees to be analysed in the project, it will be very interesting to hear the results and to decide on our best way forward, as an Association, to act on the information. The meeting will held by Zoom so will be available to those not able to join with us in person in Fermanagh House.



Figure 3: FBKA Beginners Class of 2022

Thanks to Lorraine and Wendy for the photographs.