

June 2024 Report from Fermanagh Beekeepers Association.



William Martin explains the observation hive



Cell bar with queen cells

June in Fermanagh was another month with a mixed bag of weather, mostly unseasonably cold but interspersed with some glorious days. The cold winds made it unattractive for bees to fly from the hive but, in spite of this, most colonies managed to collect enough pollen and nectar to keep themselves healthy. There were a few reports of beekeepers having to feed their bees but these were largely colonies which had not been strong enough in May to store honey in the supers. It can be difficult for new beekeepers to estimate the amount of stores in the hive and act when necessary. They have so much to see when they open a hive and making that 'guess-timate' about stores and recording it will come with experience and practice.

Virgin queens seem to have been able to take their chances on the few sunny days to get mated as indicated by the amount of pollen going into these colonies. Usually, beekeepers have to exercise great patience while waiting the requisite number of days/weeks before examining colonies to see if (i) the queen cell has hatched and (ii) the emergent virgin queen has mated and is laying but the weather has acted as the restraint this year. Commencement of laying in captured swarms depends on whether the swarm is a prime swarm with a laying queen or a cast with a virgin. Capped worker brood is the final confirmation that all has gone to plan. Our worry now is whether or not the adverse conditions have allowed the virgins to mate with satisfactory numbers of drones so that they will continue to lay fertilised eggs well into next spring and summer.

Beekeepers are never satisfied! Here in Fermanagh, as in many other areas in Ireland, we are endeavouring to protect and promote *Apis mellifera mellifera*, the black bee, so we are examining our worker bees for any signs of colour which might indicate that the queen has mated with drones of another sub-species.

As June ends, we are seeing an increase of white clover in grazing fields and on roadsides and are hoping for an increase in temperature so that the nectar will be secreted and collected by the bees. The resultant honey is delicious. The pollen is fawn. The second July wild flower just coming into

bloom here is meadow sweet with its pale green pollen. Our honeybees will collect copious amounts of both pollen and nectar from it. These are just two of the many plants upon which we are pinning our hopes.

The Erne queen rearing group continues to brave the weather in the Association apiary, facing evenings when the rain never ceased. A large number of virgin queens have been produced using the grafting of very young larvae method. Mating from the apideas has been reported as being erratic – weather again! The 25 members include beekeepers from Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim and Clogher Valley as well as our own members. This ensures that there is a good spread of black queens and therefore drones, which carry the native Irish gene, will be numerous throughout the area, reducing the probability of virgin queens mating with drones of other, less desirable, sub-species.

We are indebted to David Bolton for the following update on the Wild Bee project.

The Fermanagh Beekeepers' project to support wild honey bee colonies is now into its sixth year. In total 17 boxes have been put in place across the County - mostly in trees in old woodlands. A recent check showed that 10 boxes at least have colonies living in them - including some late swarms from last summer which were not expected to make it through the winter. These colonies, along with another ten or so living in old trees and buildings are being monitored as part of the NUI Galway Honey Bee Research Centre's study into our native North European Dark Bee. This is an all-Ireland citizen science project aimed at learning more about the native honey bee and the Fermanagh colonies form an important part of the study. Regular updates are provided to the Galway team on whether bees have been seen, if they are dark in colour and if they are bringing in pollen - all important indicators for understanding what is happening in a bee hive - wild or managed. The Fermanagh project has been able to provide additional data from sensors in some of the boxes which gives a detailed insight into what is happening in the boxes - especially during the cold months when bees seldom are seen flying from their home.

Some enterprising non-beekeepers have approached the Association for information about plans on how to build the wild bee boxes. So far, at least six have been made and put in place by local people interested in having honey bees in their garden or nearby - without the responsibilities of looking after a managed hive.

The Association is very grateful to those individuals and organisations that take an interest in the project and have provided support and access to their old woodlands, and to those who have told us about wild colonies they know of. If you know of any honey bee colonies living in old trees, buildings or other places please let us know. You can email the details to info.fermanaghbeekeepers@gmail.com. We are interested in hearing about the location; if the colony is in a tree, building or other site; if known, when the swarm moved in and any other information, including how we can get in touch with you.

Fermanagh BKA was represented at the commemoration of the D-day landings at St Angelo Airport. The observation hive attracted much attention as usual, especially from the young people but the couple in the photograph, who were on a cycling holiday, were especially interested as their son is researching an aspect of honeybees at Imperial College London for his PhD thesis. They had to come all the way to Fermanagh for their first experience of the observation hive!

Later in the month we were invited to put on a display at the Farm Open Day at the Enniskillen campus of CAFRE. The Association is grateful for these opportunities to explain the importance of all pollinators but most especially the honeybee and the endeavours of the FBKA to keep bees as healthy as possible by offering training and support to those who wish to keep bees. Honeybees are no different from other livestock in that we must learn how to care for them.



On Safari

The tradition of an annual Safari has been restored after being suspended because of COVID. The trip this year was kindly organised by Teresa O'Hare who is still a member of FBKA in spite of now living in County Down. She works with the Mourne Heritage Trust and has an in-depth knowledge of the countryside and, being a beekeeper, she understands what will be of interest to our members. Twelve members travelled to County Down, starting with tea and scones (courtesy of the Mourne Heritage Trust) in the apiary of Dromore and District Beekeeping Association. The apiary site itself is of interest, being situated in the remains of an ancient fort. This is a teaching apiary where school groups can watch colonies being handled from the safety of the observation hut. Queen rearing, breeding from native Irish black queens, also takes place in the apiary.

After lunch in the Ark Community Centre gardens, the apiaries of two members were visited. Between these visits, the group called in at a local church, seeing the ruins of the original 7th Century building. Before the group split up to go to their respective lodgings for the night, Teresa hosted a most enjoyable barbeque at her home.

On Sunday morning members regrouped at the Bloody Bridge car park and travelled to the Silent Valley Park. Here they saw a wild colony living in a disused building with several bait hives nearby hoping to catch any swarms from it. Teresa was able to obtain permission for the group to drive up to Ben Crom dam where a climb up the steps to the top of the dam revealed a spectacular view of the Mourne scenery. Stephen Hey (Chairman) expressed thanks to Teresa and Dromore and DBKA for their generous hospitality and to Andy for organizing the Safari.

The Annual Honey Show will be held on Sunday August 24th at Florence Court. This may seem an early reminder but to produce honey and wax for show takes time and patience – it doesn't always work out first time! The format this year will be slightly different with exhibitors collecting their show items at 5.0pm on the day of the Show as the venue will not be secure overnight. On Monday 25th August, Association members will be present to speak to those interested about honeybees, their importance to the environment, explaining the life cycle etc. and hopefully there will be Fermanagh honey on sale.



Honey bee on blossom