July/August 2025 Report from Fermanagh Beekeepers Association.

Red admiral on buddleia in July

The hedgerows in Fermanagh were a joy this July with honeysuckle, fuchsia, meadow sweet, very early rosebay willow herb and its sister hairy willow herb, all the vetches and myriads of smaller wild flowers vying for attention. All were being visited by a whole range of pollinators and it was especially delightful to see a huge hatch of red admiral butterflies visiting buddleia (also early) in mid – July.

Last year I saw just one butterfly belonging to what I think of as the big four in Fermanagh ie red admiral, painted lady, small tortoise and peacock and this year the only one missing is the painted lady, a migrant, but it has been seen in the county, just not in my garden. All four rely on nettles as food for their larvae so we shouldn't be too tidy if we hope to promote suitable habitat. There were numerous other species such as orange tip (nasturtiums), meadow and hedge brown and commas, uncommon in Northern Ireland.

In a discussion early this summer, it was mentioned how few honeybees seemed to forage on the plants in our gardens. We can provide early pollen and nectar for all species of bee and for other pollinators by growing spring flowering shrubs and bulbs but the sheer size of the honeybee nest compared with that of other insects, including wasps, means that they must forage further afield to find the quantities of food necessary, leaving our gardens for pollinators which do not fly as far afield.

Our beekeepers are reporting that there was a large amount of honey harvested after the early spring flow (mainly sycamore) with a steady build up of honey during our very good summer weather. Dry hot weather was excellent but without moisture, plants cannot secret nectar and I did not see much evidence of early morning dew this year (maybe I wasn't out of bed in time!) so perhaps this restricted honey production. Fermanagh beekeepers thank Niall our apiary manager for all his work in removing the honey-filled supers in the Association apiary and extracting the honey and Lorraine for bottling and labelling it ready for sale.

It was with sadness that we learned of the death of a beekeeper from Mayo who was working at her hives and we send our sympathy to her family and beekeeping colleagues. While we do not know the details of this distressing accident, it gives us all a wake-up call as regards to our own safety and is a good time to remind ourselves of the basics, beginning with protective clothing, no holes and properly fastened, a smoker lit and at the ready, even if we think it won't be necessary and a water spray. As the apiary is approached, activity should be noted - are the bees flying freely and taking no notice of humans in the vicinity? At the entrance to the hive, are the guard bees patrolling and on the alert? When the crown board is removed, do the bees rise up to meet you? Unless it is absolutely necessary to carry out the colony examination, abort it and come back another day. Going through the colony, are the

bees running about on the frames and finally is there a sharp, acetic acid type of smell, signifying that the bees have had enough of this interference? If yes, it's time to close up. If the colony is normally docile, we shouldn't be surprised if there is a thunder storm shortly afterwards.

The Queen Rearing Group has concluded a successful season. The group has grown to 27 members and has produced 246 virgin queens, the last being distributed in early September, with 77 being mated and the fate of 130 still to be determined. A further 39 were lost to swallows, weather or absconding colonies. 30% members reported greater than 50% mating success rate, with 1 member having a successful mating of 80%! Mating was most successful between 13th June and 8th August reflecting the importance of weather on queen rearing. These queens are reared from Black Bee stock. They will have mated with drones from the colonies in the local area but since the programme has been running for a number of years now, these drones will also be of Black Bee descent, thus conserving the native Irish bee in the area. Queens, some virgin and some mated, are given to beekeepers who wish to improve the genetics of their own bees, to those who find a colony queen less and to those who are interested in promoting the black bee. The group not only gives the participants the knowledge and skills necessary to rear queens but also demonstrates and improves handling skills. The co-ordinator of the group is Brian Dane and the practical instructor in the apiary is Thomas McCaffrey and we thank them for the considerable time and effort they devote to the group from May to the end of August. The group could not operate so efficiently without apiary Manager, Niall's efficient input – thank you Niall.

Sergi junior at his hives with his trophy and winning honey

Section of honey

Our annual Honey Show was held at Florencecourt House on Sunday 23rd August. Entries were received by Mary, Patricia McKillen and Eileen McHugh. Jim Fletcher judged all the classes. His stewards were Kelley Harris, Eileen Tracy and Jackie Barry and, as usual, this was an educational experience as they watched and listened while Jim judged.

Cup winners were as follows:
Moore Cup for a frame of honey ready for extraction – Paddy Gilligan
McConnell Shield for best tasting honey – Stephanie Winslow
Flanagan Novice Exhibitor trophy – Sergi Patamaleik
Fermanagh Cup for two jars of medium honey – Paddy Gilligan
Women in Agriculture Cup for best exhibit in show– Paddy Gilligan
Vaughan Cup for most points – Paddy Gilligan

As usual, there was an educational display, complete with the ever popular observation hive, and honey from the FBKA apiary for sale. William Martin, Sergi, Kelley and Jackie explained to the public what was happening in the observation hive and answered questions from the public. The honey taken from the hives this season was very popular as the mixture of floral nectars gives it a beautiful flavour. Many thanks to all who entered products in the show and especially to all who helped set up tables etc.,and carried out the different tasks necessary to make the show a success and an especial word of thanks to Jim who travelled from Comber to judge.

One aspect of an event such as this is seeing how beekeeping can be practised by whole families and by the young people also. We are grateful to Sergi for the photograph showing Sergi junior and his younger sister at the family hives with his exhibit for the show and the trophy which he won.

Much less pleasant is the news that the Asian hornet, an exotic insect, has arrived in County Cork. At least one nest has been tracked down and destroyed, hopefully before next year's virgin queens and drones were produced. The Asian hornet is bigger than our native wasps but not as large as the native wood wasp with its huge ovi-positor. It's life cycle is similar to, but not identical, to that of wasps. It is, like the native wasp, a carnivore and will prey on insects of all sizes including bees of all species and is yet another threat to our pollinators. These are predators which can destroy a colony of bees in a very short time, such is its appetite for flesh to feed to the larvae in its huge secondary nest. In addition it has a vicious sting. It can be identified by its size, the yellow tips to its legs and the yellow band on its abdomen and at the moment our role and that of the public is to be vigilant. If it is seen a photograph should be taken and sent to the Northern Ireland Environmental Agency. The hornet should not be caught or handled because of its potent sting. Special protective clothing and training is required to deal with it.

The **Level 3 ' Proficiency in Beekeeping'** classes start in October. The Level 1 course gives the basics required to look after honeybees and, most importantly, introduces the participants to the beekeeping communities near to them. The BK Associations offer help in many ways through mentoring, the WhatsApp group and regular meetings but the Level 3 course gives in-depth insights into the workings of the honeybee and explains the reasoning behind many

of the techniques of practical handling. The course runs over two years with each of 9 Units being assessed via workbooks submitted online and is completed by a Unit 10 practical assessment at a later date when the candidate feels prepared. The course enhances the practical beekeeping experience of participants, developing understanding and encouraging personal research into the various topics. Further details may be found on the Cafre website by entering 'beekeeping' in the search box. Registration is now open and we would encourage anyone interested and who has completed a recognised foundation course to join, as well as reminding those who have attended the first year of their course to register for the second year.

The September meeting of Fermanagh Beekeepers will be held on Thursday 25th at 8.00pm in Fermanagh House. Emma Irwin, with the help of Brian Dane, will explain the cleaning of wax and demonstrate some of its uses. This is a topic which will be of interest to non-beekeepers and beekeepers alike and all are invited to come along.