

## January 2024. Report from Fermanagh Beekeepers' Association.

January has thrown a variety of weather at us, but without prolonged spells of very cold weather to threaten the level of stores in hives as the bees consume the honey to convert it into energy and heat. The torrential rain does not present problems to well-maintained hives which are raised on stands and only a few of our beekeepers have reported any damage caused in apiaries due to the high winds. Most had their hives well secured and with weights on the rooves to prevent them being blown off. Those who did have hives blown over or lose rooves, managed to set the colonies up again fairly quickly and are keeping their fingers crossed that all is well.

Passing through the countryside in Fermanagh, the numbers of trees which suffered damage due to the storm is extraordinary and it is no surprise to learn from two of our beekeepers, that at least two of these trees were homes to bee colonies.

One tree was newly down and when the farmer discovered that there was a colony in it, he approached Angela to see if she was interested in rescuing it and she jumped at the chance. Even though the tree was felled, the bees were still relatively well protected from the elements as the nest was about a metre into the hollow trunk and she managed to get comb and bees into a nucleus box. Angela is not absolutely sure that she has the queen but time will tell.

The second rescue was more problematic as the tree had been down some days and had split open, exposing the bees to the rain but the photographs show some of the comb and Joanna's work to protect them from further damage. She managed to get some thick horse blanket round the comb and made it waterproof with plastic sheeting. Neither was not tightly wrapped, allowing the passage of air to prevent the build-up of moisture in the blanket. As we all know damp can mean death for a colony. Again, only time will tell if this second colony survives. Anyone who has observed a swarm hanging from a branch in the rain, will have seen how the bees arrange themselves in a formation which allows the rain to 'run down their backs', giving them a chance to keep dry so hopefully Joanna's bees were able to do likewise.

Both colonies were described as being very black and no-one suspected that there were bees living in these two trees, the sites of which are some twenty miles apart. We cannot help wondering how many other wild colonies exist in these two areas and in the county as a whole. We would ask anyone in County Fermanagh who spots a colony of wild bees to let us know as such data can be added to that of the Wild Bee Project directed by David Bolton.



*Bees in fallen tree*



*Hamamelis mollis (witch hazel) in full bloom*

In reality, this is a time of year when we all have our fingers crossed regarding the survival of our apiary colonies. We wonder if there was any residual infection which we may have missed seeing last autumn before we 'put the bees to bed' and which may have been insidiously working its way through the colony, how successful was our *Varroa* treatment, this in spite of the monitoring of mite levels carried out, both before and after treatment, was the colony *really* large enough to be able to generate the temperatures necessary for life and movement, how well mated was that queen we introduced at the end of the summer, how heavy should the hive be at this time of year? – the list goes on. It is easy to understand the temptation to open up the colony on the first day with a touch of sunlight to satisfy our need for answers. Those who are relatively new to beekeeping, and some of the more experienced hands as well, should consider the effect of opening a colony at any time of year. First we take the roof and crown board off, perhaps with some difficulty because of the build-up of propolis after the winter (it can be just as bad in summer!). Has this the same effect as a mini-earthquake? Think of the light pouring into the dark of the brood box, never mind the heat pouring out of it and we haven't even started on the brood box yet! If this early option is taken, ensure that it is quick and that something is learned, such as the number of seams of bees and perhaps a fast check that the queen has space to lay.

An inspection should never be carried out to satisfy the curiosity of the beekeeper but should have a purpose in mind which either benefits the bees or is part of the beekeeper's management of his bees. Bearing this in mind, it is best for the small scale beekeeper to wait until the weather is warmer. My grandfather's barometer relied on the flowering currant being in bloom but in these days of climate change, this gets earlier every year and I tend to choose a day when I can go outside and be comfortable in short sleeves. To grab the opportunity, get all the equipment ready now i.e. the smoker cleaned, smoker fuel ready, bee box with hive tools etc. spring-cleaned, a bucket ready for the washing soda solution, a lidded bucket for brace comb, a clean bee suit with no holes in it, especially the hood, and nitrile gloves. A queen excluder, a crownboard, a nucleus box with frames with drawn comb if available, a clean open mesh floorboard and a couple of supers are 'just-in-case' items.

For those who over-winter their bees with a super under the brood box, this first inspection is the time to remove it. It's quick and simple. Take off the roof and place it upside down close by, leaving the crown board in place. Place a queen excluder on the roof diagonally (to catch the queen should she be dislodged, which very rarely happens). Lift the brood box onto the queen excluder, remove the super, replace the open mesh floor with a clean one, place the brood box back on this floor. The bees have not been disturbed at all and the super frames can be examined for (i) do any need replacing because of mould (again rare) or (ii) is there any brood in the super? Leave the super on the now vacant queen excluder and put a crown board on top.

The brood chamber can be inspected and the main things to look for and note in hive records are firstly, the presence of eggs, larvae and, with luck, the queen may be spotted. This is the time to mark her and, if wished, clip her wing, as there are fewer bees than later in the season and no drones to confuse the eye. Secondly, count and note the number of frames of brood so that at the next inspections, judgements can be made as to the vitality of the queen. Thirdly, as the frames are lifted out, keep an eye on the brood and its cappings, noting and exploring anything that looks different to normal as it may signify presence of disease. Chalkbrood may be visible at this first inspection and hopefully, as the weather warms, bees fly more strongly and the colony becomes better balanced, this will decrease. Lastly, ensure that the queen has room to lay. If not, remove some frames of food and replace them with frames of drawn (preferably) foundation. Be careful not to split the brood nest with these frames.

If the bees are covering at least seven frames in the brood box, the super just removed can be added above a queen excluder. It must be added if it had brood in it. Don't worry about where the queen

is, as if she is in the super, eggs will be seen at the next inspection and she can be found and moved to the brood box – no eggs, she is in the brood box. Remember that, if brood has been raised in super frames, these frames must be removed when all the brood has hatched.

Add the crown board and roof and leave the apiary, happy in the knowledge that the bees have come through the winter successfully.



***Andy Loizoides (Honorary Secretary)  
William Martin (Treasurer) and  
Lorraine Wild (out-going Secretary)***



***Eileen Treacy and Wendy Buchanan  
at the FBKA Annual Dinner***

At the FBKA Annual General Meeting, Stephen Hey was re-elected as Chairman, Jackie Barry is Vice-chairman, Andy Loizoides was appointed as Honorary Secretary with Wendy Buchanan as Assistant Secretary, William Martin remains as Treasurer with Emma Irwin as his Assistant Treasurer and Niall Lunny is now Apiary Manager with Jerome O'Shea as his Assistant. Lorraine Wild retired from the Honorary Secretary position. Lorraine managed to keep meetings for our Association going during Covid via Zoom, which was relatively new to most of us in early 2020, helping to keep members in contact, as well as fulfilling her other secretarial duties with impressive efficiency and Emma Irwin, out-going Apiary Manager, (with assistant James) managed the colonies in our apiary during the same period. Her ability to keep the queen rearing group supplied with all the frames of foundation, supers, clean hive tools and dummy boards, to mention but a few of the pieces of equipment needed, was outstanding. The Association thanks both of them for their contribution during what were often challenging times.

The next meeting of the Fermanagh Beekeeping Association will be on **Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> February at 8.00pm in Fermanagh House**. The speaker is to be confirmed but Andy will inform members by email and WhatsApp. As usual all are welcome and we hope to see a good attendance from our members.





*The first few blooms on the pulmonaria (lung wort)*