

Cumbria Bee Times

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(Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the editor and do not necessarily represent those of the CBKA)

Colony Losses

Over the last two years the BBKA has mounted a highly effective media publicity campaign designed to publicise the threats to the welfare of bees, and to bring pressure to bear on the government to increase the amount of public money spent on research into the detection, prevention and cure of bee diseases. So effective has this campaign been that almost any member of the public who discovers that they are talking to a beekeeper anxiously enquires after the health of the beekeepers colonies.

Whilst this is very praiseworthy, I feel that there is danger in overdoing it. Many potential new beekeepers could be put off by the fear that they will easily lose everything to disease, having spent a lot of money in setting up. I also feel, from talking to fellow experienced beekeepers, that quite a few have convinced themselves that they face unprecedented disease problems. Colony Collapse Disorder is a frequent topic of conversation, with grave talk of severe winter losses and much gloomy headshaking taking place.

Although we have experienced high losses after the last two winters, I do not believe these to be unprecedented, and feel we should try to keep things in proportion. Recently, I have been browsing through some of my old beekeeping papers, and came across a couple of articles from the past (Both published in John Skinner's excellent "Beside Bee Times" in 1994).

The first is an address to the Cumbria BKA Autumn Conference in November 1982 by the late, but very great, Willy Dodd. In this he maintains that "normal" winter losses should be assessed at 25%. In order to maintain an apiary of four hives you should plan to put five colonies down to winter. He also quotes an earlier author, Samuel Simmins, in "A Modern Bee Farm" as saying that to maintain an apiary of 100 colonies, you had to put down 120 to winter. That is, it is not unusual to experience losses of 25%. All living things eventually die, and this is the "normal" rate for bee stocks, on average.

Also in the "Beside Bee Times", an article by John Skinner himself, writing in September 1988 is headed "Thoughts on Bad Summers and Wintering Bees". He reports that the summers of 1985-87 from July onwards were poor, with spells of wet and relatively cold, windy weather. The bees suffered accordingly in the following years, and reports that in 1986 the bee population was reduced by 30-50% over large areas of the U.K. Does this sound familiar? There was no talk of CCD then! He says that the main problems created by the long wet periods in July and August were (and are):- Poor mating of queens produced during the normal swarming season, leading to queen failure during the winter or a drone-laying queen in spring.

Little surplus nectar can be gathered from July onward. Early removal of the honey crop, on the basis that the bees "will get enough during the summer to keep them going" is a mistake. The lack of a nectar flow slows brood rearing right down, little pollen can be collected, and young bees are not produced in any great number for the winter. The bees look all right and the hives may seem strong, with plenty of bees. A massive feed of sugar in September will not remedy the situation – the bees take it down all right and will survive the winter but will dwindle away and die out in the spring due to the shortage of young bees and pollen. John recommends two things to meet such a situation. Firstly, refrain from killing off old laying queens until you are sure your new queen is mated and laying vigorously. Secondly, feed your bees with dilute sugar syrup at once after removing the honey (Say 2 pints per week). This will keep them happy, raising brood and collecting pollen until you do your normal thick syrup feeding in September

So, the "disastrous" recent 30-40% colony losses are not unprecedented. If you add a few cases of ineffective varroa control, I think that the high levels of colony losses we have experienced in the last two years are readily explained, without assuming some unknown disease factor, such as Colony Collapse Disorder. All is not doom and gloom. Let us look forward to a good season in 2010!

John Harris

Branches and Secretaries

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