

July - A Tale of Two Cities

With all the bee wrangling last month, July has been mainly a month of watch and wait. I am a city boy at heart and back in my early days having to wait for 8 minutes for the next Tube train was outrageous! Having to wait 4 weeks to see if the virgin queens had mated and started to lay eggs felt like forever, the poor weather really didn't help. I can't stress enough how important patience is needed for beekeeping oh and ventilation but I will get to that later.

Finally My Bee Mentor (MBM) and I got our day in the warm sun with a gentle southerly breeze; it was a perfect day for a hive and nuc inspection. We headed over to the new nuc first as there had been a few flying bees, even some with pollen. On opening the nuc we could see on the four frames nothing was happening on the outer ones, there was however a very small amount of worker brood, about the size of a fist shape and even a few uncapped larvae on the two middle frames. Something was definitely happening; the bees were very calm on the frames; no aggression at all; sadly just not a lot of bee activity.

Even with the small amount of bees on the frames we see didn't see a Queen, there must have been one, something had laid the eggs, in the nice but small worker brood pattern? MBM said maybe the Queen was at the bottom of the nuc, perhaps we could give the little colony a boost by adding a frame of brood. We closed up the nuc with its' small colony, I did feel a little sad as I had been going down to the nuc most evenings and willing them on. "Come on girls you can do this!"

We quickly turned our attention to the big hive with the brood box honey super and normal super. Things here were very different, even before we opened the hive up you could hear that gentle buzzing sound as we removed the straps. There was plenty of flying bees and loads of pollen seen going in, this was very active. Under the roof was the first normal super, not a lot going on here just the early signs of the middle frames being drawn out. The brood box honey super was busy getting filled and the honey was being capped. MBM said ideally this should be taken off but we would wait to see what was happening underneath in the normal brood box. I was feeling somewhat nervous as MBM lifted off the top box.

I think we both sighed with relief as we went through the brood frames, which had plenty of worker brood; stores around them and importantly no queen cells. Our new Queen had certainly established herself and was getting on with the job. In fact she was doing such a sterling job of laying we decided to take a frame of good worker brood and donate it to the nuc. Closing up I made the decision to keep the brood honey super on but move it to the top ready to remove it on the next week's inspection. MBM agreed that was a good idea as the weather was about to turn again, but we were asking a lot from a new Queen and her workers to cap a whole brood box of honey so it is was important that we took it off soon.

A week later.....

Everything was prepared to remove the brood box honey super off the big hive, a big plastic box with a lid that had a good seal and inside what I called a twelve frame hanger or to others a bent piece of wire fencing. The weather had certainly improved over the last few days and what's more, it looked like we were in for a week or so of good weather to follow.

We went straight to the nuc; the flying bee activity had been slow but steady. Upon opening the hive we could see inside the worker bees had increased I would say easily doubled but there were some troubling signs. No new worker brood and around the edges of the frames the cells that had nectar or pollen had signs of white mould. To make matters worse on parts of the now old outer worker brood cells there was signs of damage and maybe chalk brood beginning to form. The increase of bees had only been from the donor worker brood frame and not from a laying Queen. This nuc was not queen right. Feeling heart sunken we carefully closed up the nuc.

MBM asked if I could show a few other experienced beekeepers some photos of the frames just to get a second opinion, which I did and they did confirm that it was probably the start of chalk brood. It was also said that maybe the white mould on the cells with nectar and pollen could be due to poor ventilation. Now this was something that did occur to me at the time of the inspection. With this nuc you had the choice of a solid wooden floor or an Open Mesh Floor (OMF), I had opted for the solid floor because the colony was very small and the weather had been quite frankly rubbish and cold. The hole in the crown board had also been covered over too. On that day I had removed the solid floor, no signs of varroa thankfully, and left the OMF open to breathe and put a wire mesh over the crown board hole.

Despite giving the nuc more ventilation, the general feeling is that this wee colony will not survive and with signs of chalk brood it would be unwise to unite them to the big hive. Time is very short for the bees to sort out their queenless problem themselves. Nature and the bees will now take their own course; they might surprise us because that's what bees do, always surprising us. I remain optimistic about the nuc but I also have to be realistic too. Doesn't stop me feeling a bit sad about these girls but I am a touch sentimental like that.

Honey frame removal from the big hive was always going to be a touch "fun" as I currently don't own a port-a-bee escape or rhombus bee escape. Our method of the day was to place our big plastic box a few metres away from the hive; MBM would pull the frame; give it a whack to knock off the bees, we would both use our bee brushes to brush any hangers on; I would quickly run with it to the box put it in and close the lid making sure there are no bees inside. Got that, right now do that twelve times! The first couple of frames the bees were not too bothered, on the sixth frame they were now becoming a tiny bit agitated but no real head banging yet. Frame ten and they are now annoyed with head banging charges and high pitched buzzing because they are trying to get into your suit but get trapped in the folds of material. I did say it was "fun!"

Surprisingly no bee stings and whilst the bees really didn't like us taking their food stores and who would, it was all over quite quickly. Mainly because I can run quite fast in a bees suit, who knows maybe at the next Olympics you be able to watch the 100metre bee suit dash. Yes you're absolutely right in thinking that I have now ordered a rhombus bee escape. The hive still has a normal size honey super on and the weather looks good for a while so the bees will certainly build up their stores, there is still the heather honey harvest to come? As for the quality of the honey we had taken off, we will just have to see what we spin out of that!

As always take care now and bee safe.

Chris