

Newsletter May 2025

Hi everybody, welcome to my newsletter for May. As an old blues musician I feel entitled to start anything off on the lines of 'well I woke up this morning and the sun shone in my face', Well that was certainly the case on Saturday and I thought what a glorious day..... for a bee swarm and a couple of hours later Linda's email pops up warning of swarms and a notification of a swarm to be taken.

Membership

No new members to welcome this month, all the recent joiners are throwing themselves into beekeeping.

April Events

Well, this was held at Johns apiary, regrettably I was unable to attend. 9 members were able to attend, a mixture of newbies and more experienced, and I have heard that it was the usual very informative couple of hours with John. Apart from a couple of inspections John united 2 colonies in to one, which was to be moved to the rape, and marked a queen. More bee chat continued over coffee at Ballantrae. Many thanks to John for sharing his experience.

Kevins Bee Log

Out now and a great read, I found Kevins take on the swarming interesting and his experience gives us some hope that it will not be as mad as it was last year.

Apiary Visits

As Linda advised will be Sunday 1st June, venue and times to be advised.

Other dates for the diary

19th May – final date for Royal Highland Show Honey Show entries

Website

Our website management has been handed over from Martyn to Nick. Firstly thanks to Martyn for his work over the years – it has been much appreciated. Secondly thanks to Nick for picking this up. Our website is our "shop window" and we are often contacted by members of the public about how to learn about beekeeping and, at this time of year, swarms of bees. If you haven't had a look at our website you'll find it at www.wgba.co.uk

Things to do in May

May is usually a delightful month for beekeeping, with orchards, hedgerows, and gardens in full bloom and some very welcome long warm days. In those areas where there is a spring flow the honey will be ripening in the supers and our hives will be full of bees – it is swarming time! The very thought often fills the novice beekeeper with dread but there is no need, swarming is what honey bees do and we need to understand why they do it and how to handle it.

Why bees swarm. It is the honey bee colony's natural way of replication and without this process honey bees would have died out many years ago. The queen produces 'queen substance' (a set of pheromones) from her mandibular glands which is taken up by the worker bees and passed around the colony. All worker bees need to receive a minimum level: this communicates to the bees that they are 'queen-right' and it is a stimulus for foraging and other activities within the hive. If the colony is overcrowded, then not only may

the queen not have sufficient space to lay, but her pheromones may not reach all the bees in the required quantities – leading to swarming preparations. You will see drones present, or at least drone brood, and the bees will begin to build little acorn-shaped queen cups (play cups) around the edges of the comb. Keep an eye on those queen cups – when they have a rim of new white wax you can be sure that preparations for swarming are afoot.

So what can you do about it? We can manage the impulse to swarm by keeping young queens. It is thought that a young queen will produce larger amounts of queen substance than an older queen. We can ensure that the bees have enough room by supering early. Nectar takes up a lot more space than honey because the bees spread it out to evaporate the water and ripen it so add another super when the last one is full of bees, not honey. Make sure that the colony has plenty of ventilation as this ensures that the queen substance can be distributed easily: it also helps in the ripening of nectar. Repeatedly destroying queen cells will demoralise the bees and will not delay the swarming process for long once the colony has started preparing. Plus, bees are very good at hiding a cell or two! Work with your bees to your mutual advantage – practise swarm control by performing an artificial swarm or making up a nun or two. Read up on it or ask for help.

Be on the look-out for Asian hornet queens. We do not know if there were any Asian hornet queens over-wintering in the UK this year, but any that have survived will now be out and about searching for sugary foods to build up their energy: look for them on flowers such as camellias and around trees that ooze sap. These queens will also be constructing embryo primary nests, very similar in appearance to wasps' nests, so look for the first signs in sheltered spots like sheds and porches. The great weather and longer days allows us to extend our vigilance as we will be spending more time in our gardens and apiaries and on walks around our neighbourhood.

May Summary

If you have not already done an artificial swarm, continue 7-day inspections for occupied queen cells and take swarm control measures immediately if necessary.

Add supers ahead of the bees' requirements, i.e. when a super is full of bees, not full of honey. Remember: space for bees and space for nectar!

Remove 'ripe' oilseed rape honey: give super frames with unsealed honey cells a firm shake and if nectar flies out, leave it a little longer – it will ferment if the water content is too high.

Maintain vigilance for Asian hornets. Check traps regularly and release non-target insects (they will not drown if you put a piece of foam or crumpled kitchen roll in the bait reservoir) and look out for possible primary nests.

Dougie

Chair