

August Blog: It's all about the Heather

It's midday on Monday July 28th. I'm driving through Creetown with large signs on my car windows reading '**CAUTION LIVE BEES IN TRANSIT**'. I'm on my way to the heather moor with hives HN1 and HN2 in the back. A movement catches my eye and I realise that the rear window is covered in very agitated bees. They've escaped!

This is not the first time I've had bees celebrating freedom in the back of my car, so no panic. I'm wearing my bee suit and I know that the bees are far more concerned about escaping than attacking me. Unless they get tangled in my hair! So I drive on, and when I finally open the back door and unload the hives, the bees are mainly determined to get back into their home. Situation resolved.

I'm back on my usual site, hoping to collect a decent crop of heather honey during August. This site is a bit special to me, for a variety of reasons. It's in a recently planted private forest 400 yards from a vast swathe of heather. Access to it is totally safe, situated beyond a high security padlocked gate, completely invisible to the public. And I can drive my car right to the drop-off point for the hives. If I choose to, I can set up the hives and not give them another thought till September. And it's rent free.

Both hives are strong; I fix them on stands off the ground, fit queen excluders, then add a super of drawn combs to each, put the lids on and strap them both down. It can get pretty windy up here (270 metres above sea level) and there might be the odd wandering deer or badger around. All we need now is five weeks of unbroken, windless sunshine.

The heather began showing first signs of flowering in the last week of July, and here, on the hills above Newton Stewart, the moor was beginning to take on that wonderful purple sheen by August 7. Sadly I'm going to miss the moment when ***calluna vulgaris*** comes into full flower. I'm scheduled for a cataract operation, but the heather will still be there when I'm driving again. And one of the many good things about heather

is that some plants come into flower early, but others will wait till towards the end of August. This can prolong the season into September.

On August 4 ***Storm Floris*** arrived! With winds gusting at over 60 mph I was genuinely worried that the hives might blow over, especially as the moor is very exposed. But all was well. Next morning I checked, and the straps holding the hives together, and the secondary straps fixing the hives to their pallets, had held fast. Despite the weather the bees were actually flying. Not only that, but in one super the bees were beginning to draw new super-white comb and fill cells with amber honey.

The weather, which is so critical to heather honey production, has been massively favourable so far this year. For weeks now the temperature on the moor has reached at least 20C every day and looks like continuing until towards the end of August. There has been little wind and we've had the odd overnight shower, which is ideal for encouraging the heather blossom to secrete nectar. The bees aren't just loving it, they're working almost frantically to collect the precious crop.

Meanwhile I spent a couple of hours extracting this year's summer honey. Hardly an onerous job as there were only a couple of dozen jars. The honey is very light coloured, tastes sweet with a good flavour, but is worryingly runny. Could the water content be too high? Or is it just that it's so warm? This very small crop of summer honey is the price I pay for splitting the original hive into two last May. But that additional colony is worth far more than the lost honey.

August 27 and the weather finally breaks, not with a bang but with a whimper. After twenty days of unbroken sunny weather and average daytime temperatures peaking at over 21C, the cloud and rain have arrived. Good news for the garden, which is parched. Nevertheless the temperatures are still around 17/18C between heavy showers. So this does not quite mark the end of the heather honey season. Judging by the state of the moor there could be another productive week left, if the weather holds. Then comes extracting! Bring it on!