

October Bee Blog

The wind-down at the end of the beekeeping season is always a rather sombre affair. The excitement of the spring and summer are past and all that remains is to ensure that the bees are properly prepared for the winter. Though personally, in autumn I start looking forward to gatherings with fellow beekeepers at the monthly meetings of the Association.

The first of these was held on the last Sunday of September, and led to a lively and useful discussion on how best to prepare bees for the winter. It was followed by a detailed presentation of the rules and regulations governing the upcoming Honey Show, along with tips on how best to present entries. Unfortunately I missed this second session as I was taking advantage of a window in the weather to help a fellow member set up her hives for winter.

She's relatively new to beekeeping, but had already done a good job of preparing three of her five hives. Two hives needed their 'wet' supers removed, and varroa strips inserted into the brood boxes. The rain held off and despite the temperature being down to around 10C we completed the job quickly. Beekeeping doesn't have to be a solitary occupation!

As for my own bees, HN1 and HN2 had already consumed three litres of sugar syrup each by the first week of the month. They will continue to receive more until they cease taking it down from the rapid feeder into the hive. Both are on what is often referred to as 'one and a half' with no queen excluder. That is, they are in a deep brood box with a shallow box containing drawn comb, above it. This means they have lots of room to store food, and ventilation will be good in the hive. It's worth bearing in mind that a strong colony of bees won't die of cold in winter: it can tolerate very low temperatures. In Manitoba, Canada bees are known to survive at minus 35C because the winter cluster is so warm, even on the mantle on the outside of the cluster.

What kills colonies of bees in winter is starvation and dampness. So I try to ensure that my hives are really weather tight, and cannot be blown over in the winter gales. They are strapped to the hive stand which in turn is fixed in the ground.

Some years ago I nearly lost all my hives due to flooding. The seven hives were in the Clyde Valley, land of orchards and garden centres. The actual apiary was about fifty yards from the River Clyde, adjacent to a tiny tributary, and the hives were fixed on stands about two feet above the ground. It was early September so each hive had a brood box and two supers. For three days torrential rain poured down and I went to check the hives. To my horror the Clyde and its wee tributary were about to burst their banks. The next day the water was so high I had to wade to get to the hives. But the water kept on rising. First the hive stands disappeared under water, then it started creeping up the brood boxes. I was so dismayed I couldn't bear to go back until the levels began to fall. When I finally did, I was resigned to finding seven dead colonies. But no! I could see that the water level had reached the first super, but when I opened the crown board the top box was heaving with live bees. As the water level had risen they had migrated upwards and survived. Obviously all the brood and the honey was destroyed. But within a week the bees had cleared out their muddy homes and the queens had re-started laying. Over the winter I moved the hives to higher ground!

This is not an advert, but when buying sugar to make sugar syrup winter feed I turn to Tesco. They sell granulated sugar in very strong 5 kg polythene sacks which is nine or ten pence cheaper than buying it by the paper bag. Paper bags absorb moisture and are prone to mouse attacks. Also using the larger sacks you can take out what you need and seal the rest for later. The only snag is, that as far as I am aware, you can only get these sacks by Tesco home delivery in Galloway. I believe Farmfoods sell 2 bags of granulated sugar for £1.60

So far (October 23) the weather this month has been very mild. So much so that the bees are flying enthusiastically to take advantage of the ivy which is still in blossom. As I mentioned last month, ivy really is a huge autumn bonus if you're lucky enough to have it. The yellow flowers are a

massive source of pollen and nectar at a time when the bees really need it. It encourages the queen to keep laying late into the autumn and ensures good 'fat' bees who will see themselves through the winter.

I'm about to embark on a little experiment. My current hives are built of Western Red Cedar and when bought new were not cheap. But now the market is flooded with cheap Chinese imports. Even B&Q sell Chinese beehives! They're made of white pine, so will need treatment. But at half the usual price, I'm going to try one. They come flat-packed, so as things progress I'll attempt to give an impartial report on my findings.

The year's last intrusion into the hives comes in the last week of the month. I remove the varroa strips which have been in place since mid September. This gives me the excuse to peep into the brood boxes. There are six frames of sealed brood in each hive, a wonderfully good situation thanks mainly to the late ivy blossom. Both hives have now received 6 litres of feed and are almost too heavy to lift. I remove the rapid feeders, leave the ekes on in case I need to feed with candy later, fix a piece of polystyrene under each roof and shut both hives down for the last time in 2025. Night, night bees, see you next spring!