

Newsletter May 2026

Hi everybody, welcome to my newsletter for May. Well, the Beekeeping Year is truly upon us, Linda has already advised of a swarm notification and my own bees let me know of an impending swarm. Richard had kindly come round to spot and mark the queen and in the process found four or five, fortunately uncapped but containing egg or larva, queen cells. We did a split into a nuc box, which has hopefully prevented a swarm. The colony was a swarm of black bees that entered a bait hive last year and has grown to the point of it needing a third honey super to go on soon as they have filled two supers and are capping them over.

Honorary Member Jim McColm

5 members attended Jim McColm's recent funeral. The retiral collection in memory of Jim is to be donated to Western Galloway Beekeepers Association (at Jim's request) This is truly the measure of the man that even his last wishes were for his beloved bees and our association. I never got to meet Jim and I feel that I have missed something by not doing so. RIP Jim.

Membership

We have two new member this month, so welcome to Rachel and Tom who are new to the area but have some beekeeping experience.

April Events

Once again April's Apiary visit was at John's Apiary, I was unable to attend but I'm told it was a masterclass of beekeeping professionalism. John demonstrated Baillie Comb changes and this gave some fantastic discarded brood frames to look at in some details - a great insight not normally seen by beekeepers. A weekly inspection was also done for the benefit of the new beekeepers. I understand Lulu made a short recording of some of the days events and this will be sent by separate email. It would be good to add this video to our Facebook page and website. If anyone objects to their presence going public, please let Linda know by 9th May. Thanks John and thanks Lulu

Tony's Bee Log

Out now and a great read – thanks Tony – we look forward to hearing your updates
In last years bee blog 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. You'll find Kevin's 2025 bee blog on our website

Apiary Visits and Other Events

Mays Apiary visit will be on the last weekend - details to be advised but Sunday 3rd May we have a swarming workshop and a very busy but important day that is going to be, and on Wed 20th May we are hosting a public information meeting on behalf of the Scottish Government in respect of the Yellow Legged Hornet. As Linda has said before please tell anyone who might be interested in attending, although the threat to beekeepers my seem to some to be the only problem its implications are much wider, so Small Holders, Arable Farmers, allotment Holders, Market gardeners and Gardeners alike may be interested to hear more about the insect that could decimate the bulk of the UK's pollinators if it takes hold.

WGBA Honey Show

This will be held on Sunday 29th November. There is still time to get some mead underway in order to enter this class. Anyone entering will be provided FOC a show quality bottle and stopper. I still have a few demijohns for country wine making for sale at the price of £5 ea. which is what I paid for them at Stranraer Community Reuse shop.

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 – this month's Beecraft has an excellent article for beginners.

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.

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