

Stahlman Beekeeping Notes for 2022

Summer issues: To bee or not to
bee – Happy bees!



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I received the following comment from a beekeeper:

Hello Mr. Stahlman

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>> I listened to your talk on factors that stress bees, via Zoom, for the WCBA. I enjoyed it very much. I am brand new to beekeeping and installed 2 nucs about a month ago.

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>> I have a fundamental question about swarming. If one is keeping bees primarily to help the environment and increase the honeybee population, does allowing hives to swarm help to do this? Or do the swarms die quickly in the wild?

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>> If a beekeeper can keep colonies going after one swarm and possibly get a bit of honey, I am wondering if a lot of the stress of preventing swarms can be relieved for the beekeeper.

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>> Thank you for your newsletters!!

This is a good question and it most likely has a number of different answers. What is that old saying about ask 10 beekeepers a question and get 11 answers!

In a natural setting with any hive of bees, the bees will swarm under the right conditions. Many beekeepers like myself manage bees as much as possible to prevent swarming. And it does create some stress for beekeepers – not so much for the bees because it is a natural process of reproduction and has gone on for as long as honeybees have existed.

I also received this photo from a beekeeper asking me if this hive was about to swarm:

Swarming?



I am using this photo with permission from an Ohio friend who keeps bees.

I have mentioned this before “A swarm in spring usually results in the loss of honey to be harvested by the beekeeper.” On warm days, bees will gather outside the hive to provide for greater air circulation with-in the hive. This is most likely a case of bearding. I would inspect this hive just in case they are building swarm cells!

On Swarming:

I will certainly say if a beekeeper has less stress about the bees swarming it is okay to let them swarm! In a few cases the hive may be unable to requeen itself and it may die as a

result of not being able to replace the swarm queen. That may cause stress for the beekeeper and the bees!

I am so glad the writer of the note to me indicated "if a beekeeper can keep colonies going after one swarm."

Honeybees in the wild have been partly successful surviving but the odds are against survival. The greatest stress on all honey bees is "over population (both human and bee) in an area" to the point bees cannot store enough food for winter survival. Varroa is still a problem for all bees (wild or managed) and cause many hives/colonies to die.

Feral colonies have not fared well and many likely start as swarms from managed hives. Sooner or later wax moth, small hive beetles and Varroa will do them in!

I have looked back at a summer management issues I have written about over and over. I have titled articles with one word "ROBBING".

Stress on all of us is pretty high. COVID, gas prices, baby food availability, housing shortages, humans killing each other including things like road rage and mass shootings. I remember back to a college course in the 1950's when a professor asked us what it would take for us to steal a loaf of bread! In fact, not much more than starvation and more so if one had babies to feed!

I also had an inquiry about natural beekeeping! And questions about two words I hardly recognize: biodynamic beekeeping, and anthropogenic. It is hard to say what is going on in our world of beekeeping today.

Hello Dana.

I appreciate your newsletters. It is clear that your heart is in the right place. As busy as you must be with your bees and the bees of all the people you are mentoring, I don't know how you find time to put together your "Notes".

I have a suggested topic for you to consider. You may have heard or helped people who are under the spell of "natural beekeeping". These are well meaning folks who earnestly think they are saviors for *Apis mellifera* and we "conventional beekeepers" are causing the demise or some would say, the extinction of honey bees. They have achieved a level of enlightenment by watching clips on the internet and reading books by those who advocate a style of beekeeping that allegedly mimics the ways of honey bees in the wild. All this is fine. People in this country relish their freedom to choose and that includes how they want to raise their honey bees.

The problem I have is that when things go wrong, (and "natural" beekeeping seems to be a recipe for disaster) the people advocating for treatment free, foundationless comb, swarm friendly beekeeping are nowhere to be found. They look to me and, I assume, other beekeepers who have success with raising healthy, productive bees. It is hard enough to guide new beekeepers who have a "clean slate". It is much more difficult to convince someone who is failing at beekeeping that they have been duped. Instead of just teaching them the correct way, it requires explaining what they have been doing wrong, first.

It would be easy to simply turn my back on these folks. But I care about honey bees. (Now it sounds like I am the one trying to save the bees!) It also irks me that many of these people might grow to love beekeeping if they were not being misled. This is a growing problem; at least in my area.

We live in a very divisive world these days. One reason I love beekeeping is that it brings together people from all walks of life. I don't mean to create a split. But I think it only fair to let beginners know that if they head down this "bio-dynamic", Darwinian, natural path, then they should look to their gurus for guidance and face the fact that there might not be any answers since this method of beekeeping is inherently flawed.

Perhaps your experience in this area is different. Perhaps it has not been a problem for you. Just thought I would throw this out there for you to consider.

My internet search indicated that Biodynamic beekeeping is a sustainable way to keep happy, healthy bees! Further research came up with Biodynamic beekeeping is a way to minimize stress factors and allow bees to develop in accordance with their true nature!

How about making our bees happy! That means almost anything humans do to manage bees is forbidden. Keeping them in hives for example is not natural! Feeding them is not natural! Taking honey from them is not natural! Raising queens by either hive manipulation or anything else is not natural.

The term “Anthropogenic” came into a discussion. My vocabulary of beekeeping terms “to say the least” shows as Moses Quinby at one time said, “You don’t have all the rails on your fence.” I learned quickly, that I needed to learn more about stress and why bees are dying.

It is normal for a few hives to be lost during the fall, winter and early spring. But the losses have reached the point where we are looking at a number of reasons for the losses. I have been giving a number of talks about the stress factors facing our bees.

What can beekeepers do to manage our bees to reduce stress on them? There is very little we can do to change our environment! I just watched a short TV news item about the water drought in the west. Our rural regions are quickly becoming a gold mine for urban sprawl. Our beekeeping classes are producing more and more beekeepers especially in urban areas. The available foraging areas are being reduced at an alarming rate.

I have watched the commercial beekeeping industry struggle to survive. The successful operations are getting larger and larger – it takes more hives and equipment to make a living than in the past. Hobby beekeeping is growing and I found it interesting as I give talks that new beekeepers are very optimistic about what they can do to save the bees.

There are many natural methods used to control Varroa mites for example – brood interruption and drone brood removal from a hive. This is part of responsible beekeeping. But there is something going on with save the bees that concerns me. I am using plastic foundation inserts in my hive as well as beetle traps and taking honey from them. I don’t consider myself as making the bees unhappy. I am working to keep them healthy and alive!

Letting the bees be happy such as is the case of “the flow hive” seems like we are really messing with the natural “flow” of keeping bees. Many beekeepers face failure because they just let their bees go without the help we give by feeding, providing a watchful eye on the brood nest to make sure a hive has a laying queen, and yes, treating for diseases and pests.

What did I find out about the “True Natural Beekeeping movement?”

Natural beekeeping - Natural comb is used rather than foundation, swarming is considered the natural form of colony reproduction, regular or systematic replacement of queens is prohibited, beehives should be made of natural materials (wood, straw, or clay), pollen substitutes are prohibited, grafting larvae to produce queens is prohibited, no pesticides or antibiotics are allowed other than organic acids, and so much more. If you want to explore this system of keeping bees, seek out the eight-page .pdf of the “Demeter International Standards for Beekeeping and Hive Products”.

And finally, Happy bees! I am not sure my bees are happy when I visit them. And what are “Happy bees” anyway?