

Stahlman Beekeeping Notes For 2022

Summer issues



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The honey flow is coming to an end in the Raleigh area and our honey crop was not what I expected.

Signs that the honey flow is coming to an end:

- Bees do not build new comb on foundation.
- Bees collect outside the hive – this is called bearding.
- Idle bees become aggressive. (More on aggressive bees included later in this article)

Bee populations in our hives are reaching the maximum peak here in North Carolina. Queens have not yet reduced egg laying but as brood nests become congested the bees will swarm or the queen will begin to lay fewer eggs. It is normal for bees to reduce population growth of the colony when foraging bees fail to find nectar. Swarming is less likely during summer or fall – (but it is not rare for a hive to swarm even in September.)

One reason for a colony to have a congested brood nest is the beekeeper uses a queen excluder to confine the queen to the brood chamber. Bees will store honey below the queen excluder. This reduces the number of cells available for eggs. Queen excluders do one thing—they prevent the queen from putting brood in honey supers above it. Thus, a controversy over the use of queen excluders. Some like them and others call them “honey excluders”. There are a few specialized uses for queen excluders but this is not the place to discuss them.

During the summer season beekeepers working hives will find hives filled with bees. These large populations make finding the queen difficult. I have had this week reason to check for queens. On my inspections, I am good with a hive when I pull a frame and see larva. Eggs are harder to see. Young larva are easy to see -- thus, I can assume the queen was in the hive four days earlier and is most likely there now. I put frames back and move on to the next hive.

But, when bee populations are large we often find a hive that is very aggressive. Earlier in the season, they could be managed easily. Now, they are nasty!

Let me describe nasty! When I remove the inner cover from a hive, I apply a small amount of smoke to the top bars. The bees usually rise to the top bar and smoke turns them around. A nasty aggressive hive is not much deterred by smoke. They attack the hands and attack anyone standing near-by. To say the least, they are not fun to work around. Aggressive bees are easily agitated. They often continue their attack by following the beekeeper some distance. Someone indicated to me, "They followed me to my kitchen door and waited for me to come out!" Those are nasty bees!

Owning such a hive puts visitors at risk. One needs to be careful about working a hive like this when there is activity such as: the next door neighbor mowing grass or entertaining guests.

Management of a nasty hive -- moving slowly, and trying to be as gentle as possible -- does not work. The only solution is to take drastic action. Killing the queen will not change the hives aggressiveness immediately. But that is the most humane way to change the behavior of a hive.

A nasty hive such as this has a number of frames of brood. Using our knowledge of brood development – 21 days from egg to adult bee and the fact that bees live for approximately 40 days, it may take as long as six weeks before all those nasty bees are gone!

A hive like this does not belong in an area with a lot of people traffic. The easiest solution is to move the hive to the country where it will not be causing problems. There it can be dequeened. Don't let the bees raise another queen on their own. Aggressiveness is genetic. A new queen raised by the bees will carry those aggressive genes. Buy a queen from someone known for selling gentle queens. Requeening the hive will definitely make beekeeping more fun.



The most drastic method to deal with an aggressive hive:

At one time killing a hive of bees was not hard. This is cyanide and it kills humans. It is no longer available as far as I know. I am asked about how beekeeping has changed and this is one way.

Today's methods vary! A hive can be killed in these hot summer conditions by sealing up the hive – close all openings for air to get into the hive and move the hive into the sun. Bees die when over-heated. No need to look for the queen. Hive equipment in

this example is saved and can be cleaned up for reuse. Insecticides should not be used in or near bee equipment.

New gentle bees can then be installed into the hive and the hive restarted.

Management in hot weather:

- Work bees when there is no threat of rainy weather.
- Work bees when most of the foraging bees are out of the hive looking for food.
- Even if it is hot, wear good protective clothing.
- Spend as little time inspecting a hive as possible.
- Know what you are looking for when you open a hive.
- Put robber screens on hives.
- Check to see the direction bees flying from the hive. It might be interesting to see where and what they are foraging on.

Now is the time to be aware of robbing!



When I was working my bees a few days ago, the bees followed me from one hive to another. This is what a general idea of robbing looks like. I took a movie to capture the sound which is quite noticeable. The bees are not only trying to get into the entrance of this hive but they are looking for any opening that would allow them to enter.

I did find one hive completely robbed out. Once these robber bees find a hive unable to protect itself, it doesn't take long before it is wiped out.

I often see comments something like "I visited my hive just a week ago and they were fine. I checked today and they are gone! Why?"

A hive being robbed!

- A swarm of bees flying around a hive – top to bottom, around the front and sides of the hive.
- A loud steady buzz that does not stop. (This is different from young bees taking orientation flights which doesn't continue on and on - ending in a few minutes.)
- Robbing continues until there is nothing more to rob!

The answer to robbing is try to prevent it.

- Don't feed early in the day. Feeding a weak hive is asking for trouble.

- Put entrance reducers on hives that have small populations of bees.
- Robbing screens are worth their weight in gold – A good one will have an opening that can be closed off and yet allow a few bees from the hive to enter and leave and provide good ventilation into the hive.
- When a hive is being inspected, check the brood pattern for signs of problems. Any sign of scattered (not solid brood) indicates the bee population needed to protect the hive is not happening.

If one finds a hive that has been robbed, the signs are apparent.

- Some dead bees either outside on the landing board or on the floor of the bottom board.
- The hive generally abandoned by the bees. All the bees including the queen. One may find capped brood. Robbing bees will cannibalize larva.
- Comb will not contain any honey. The cells that held honey will have a zagged appearance. (The robbers are in a feeding frenzy and once the cell has no more honey, they leave a mess behind.)
- Chips of cappings will line the floor of the bottom board between frames.

What can be done if one observes robbing in progress?

- It may be too late to save the hive. Bees picked on it for a reason.
- But several several things can be done.
 - Cover the hive with a wet sheet to prevent bees from getting into the hive.
 - Stop up the entrance with grass, sod, or anything available to prevent bees from getting into the hive. Once robbing has started it is hard to stop.
 - Move the hive some distance away.
 - It is best not to work other hives during a robbing frenzy!
 - Finally, a trick used by my grandpa many years ago when working in a commercial bee yard. Take the top covers off all the hives in the beeyard and thus expose every hive to robbing. Bees are forced to go back to their own hive to protect it.