

STAHLMAN BEEKEEPING

NOTES FOR 2023

Issue # 34 September 9, 2023 [We all start a new season with the opportunity to improve.]

I am sure you are familiar with the saying “Some gardeners have a green thumb!” This beekeeping year has been interesting for a number of reasons. I had a great early spring honey flow and my bees got into the swarming season giving me all kinds of problems trying to prevent swarming. Then summer came along with hot, hot weather and the area where I live dried up. My bees went from the land of plenty to almost a land of nothing.

Some say “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence!” That is true in many cases. Just miles away bees were finding something to forage on – not much but enough to prevent starvation.

I visited David Bailey on Thursday and he had just received a shipment of 50+ queens when a customer entered the store to pick up one of them. This customer was on the ball. He knew where to get queens and he had a reason for buying one. Failing queens need to be replaced before a complete collapse of a bee hive occurs.

Next beekeeping season begins now for those of us with live hives of bees. We all deal with issues such as feeding, treating for Varroa but one of the most import issues is the queen that will carry the colony into next season. I can say with some experience that I feel the most important skill is evaluating a queen and the amount of brood she is producing at any stage of the year.

To survive a colony must be in good health, have no mite or small hive beetle issues, and most of all have a well mated queen with a good population of worker bees. It is true that some hives will die out over the winter season without ample food stores. But the indication that a hive is in trouble can be spotted! Pulling frames of brood, counting the frames with brood, and looking critically at how the brood occupies the brood area of a frame is an indication of a hives future with that particular queen.

Unfortunately, I am seeing a number of beekeepers owning hives with failing queens that will never get to the winter season. In many cases

IMPORTANT POINTS

Let's look at the positive side of beekeeping!

I am reading a number of beekeeping blogs in which some beekeepers are saying they have lost bees.

The word “why” is almost always included in the post.

A positive approach is to gear up for next year.

First, look at all the things the bees did this year.

- If you are new to beekeeping, you have one year of experience under your belt. We all Learn from experience.
- The investment in equipment is not lost. New bees can be purchased next year.
- If we had problems, try to figure out what went wrong .
- **Every year is different! So what can you do?**
- There are many opportunities to study, read, & attend bee meetings. Take a bee school again, with some experience, you can ask better questions.

colonies have already died – and wax moth and small hive beetles have added the closing chapter to their existence. But the problems began well before what is seen now! I repeat – wax moth do not kill a hive. Nor do yellow jackets!

About the only thing a beekeeper can do with a dead-out hive is clean up the equipment – before the wax moth destroy everything – and plan for next year.

A hive without hope is one with little or no brood in the hive at this time of the year. Signs of a failing hive anytime during the bee season:

- Most obvious is a hive with a small population of worker bees.
- Or a hive that has no brood.
- Or worker bees with deformed wings indicating a serious mite problem.

Just because a hive has a queen is no assurance that the hive will survive. A beekeeper must always be watchful for failing queens. The reason -- some queens are poorly mated. This is a major problem with package and nucs sold with queens raised very early in the year. These queens play out – meaning that the sperm stored in their spermatheca was used up during the summer season and now little sperm remains. This is also true of queens raised in late summer. If drones are observed in a hive late in the season, it might be a sign that something is wrong with the queen. Any queen mated at anytime needs a good population of drones. A poorly mated queen may lay eggs but if the eggs are not fertilized, the future for a hive is not good.

A study of the brood pattern in a hive is an early indicator that the colony may have a problem. Sometimes the bees will requeen – something called supersedure. Many times the beekeeper has no idea of things going on in the hive. Thus, the beekeeper ends up trying to understand why a hive was taken over by small hive beetle or wax moth.

I am often called upon to give my thoughts on hives and what can be done. This is a case study of three situations:

1] What does one do with a hive that has been completely robbed out and the bees are gone?

My answer – other beekeepers may have a different take or thought on this.

If the comb is in good condition remove it from boxes and put the frames in a freezer until cold weather arrives. If freezing is not an option -- do not store frames in a tote or plastic bag. Give the frames plenty of light. Keep them in a cool place! One can also treat with moth crystals.

CLEAN UP THE EQUIPMENT AND ORDER BEES EARLY FOR NEXT YEAR. There is value in equipment – more value than in the bees. Honey bees are easy to replace. At current prices it is hard to justify burning any equipment. If beekeeping turns out to be not for you – list the equipment for sale on Facebook (Marketplace).

New frames with undrawn foundation can cost almost \$2.50 to \$4.00 per frame. I see older bee equipment such as supers selling for \$25.00 to \$40.00 with drawn comb in frames.

And I saw an unsettling post on FB of a beekeeper burning frames with wax moth damage. What a shame – at the least, something like some wax could have been saved. I have seen the same with small hive beetle damage. Frames can be cleaned and reused. A solar wax melter is a valuable piece of beekeeping equipment that could easily have killed the wax moth, eggs and larva and saved some wax and allowed for an easier clean-up of frames.

2] What does one do with a hive that has bees in it – no queen but there are still some bees, no capped brood, and no sign that the hive has raised a queen?

As I write this, it is September 8. If this description fits one of your hives, I have two responses. Neither involve buying a new queen or moving frames of brood from a good hive to it so the bees can raise their own queen.

My answer: I consider a hive like this as already lost. The option of letting it raise a new queen is off the table. Two reasons – lack of drones in late summer and the time for the hive to build up a bee population is already lost.

Why: All the elements of nature are against this being successful. If given a frame with young larvae, it will take about two weeks for the hive to produce a virgin queen. Result – small bee populations are not likely to be successful raising brood in cold weather – brood temperatures of 92° F can not be maintained. All the bees one sees in the hive at this time will die before winter arrives.

What to do: Combine the bees with another hive or just let them die out. If one selects the second choice – what can one do if this is the only hive they have? A beekeeper with only one hive is at a great disadvantage -- that is why almost every bee school I have been involved with suggest students start beekeeping with two hives.

3] What does a beekeeper do with a weak hive -- It has capped brood, a queen laying a few eggs, some larvae but brood is confined to just a frame or two and a small bee population?

My answer: This one is a bit tougher to answer. I have a lot of questions:

Does it have a good supply of honey stores?

If not - can it be saved by feeding? Even feeding at this late date, this hive may not have time to increase brood numbers to survive the winter.

- If it does have honey stores – why is it weak? A poor queen situation – one solution might be to requeen the hive immediately. If the bee population is increased with a laying queen and enough bees are available to provide necessary brood heat, the hive may have a chance to survive. One other option is to combine the hive with another

hive. Two weak hives combined with a new laying queen is more practical than taking some brood from a strong hive to reinforce a weak hive. (C.C. Miller's thoughts.)

Has the hive been checked for mites?

- If yes and the hive has been treated – Do another mite check. If mite levels are low, see the answer above.
- If the answer is no, weak hives may have large Varroa mite populations – under no circumstance would I combine this hive with another hive. Do a mite count, treat for mites and then consider if the hive can be combined with a stronger hive. No time to procrastinate doing this. Every day counts.

Has the hive been inspected on a regular schedule?

- If yes, then why wasn't the problem spotted earlier when corrective action could have been effectively taken. New beekeepers are often at a disadvantage when problems occur and it is understandable when hives fail. There is no excuse for experienced beekeepers to fail to take action such as requeening a hive or treating a hive or feeding a hive. Things like poor brood production are easy to spot.
- If no inspections are made, one cannot really blame anyone other than themselves for the hives condition. That is the risk of natural beekeeping. Mother nature is in charge and she can be very hard on bees subjected to all the things that challenge our bees.

There are several kinds of beekeepers – those who have live bees in the spring and those who don't. That is the green thumb of beekeeping!

Beekeepers can study and work on improving skills. I usually do not post information about bee classes. They are often offered in the spring when it is an ideal time to start keeping bees. But a fall beekeeping class allows time for a student to absorb information when most of us are less pressed for time to do this or that. Anyone keeping bees needs to understand the nature of honeybees. There are two phases of keeping honeybees. One – when hive populations are increasing and one when hive populations decline. Beekeeping is an Art!