

STAHLMAN BEEKEEPING

NOTES FOR 2023

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It's the weather! Spring in February – Record high temperatures in Raleigh -- Bees and beekeepers are reacting to “what in the heck is going on!”

Winter is not over! Late winter management poses some interesting problems. Historically, Raleigh has had snow as late as April.

Information is at our fingertips – Weather is forecast usually 10 days in advance. But I have lived long enough to learn the weather can change drastically and sometimes with disastrous results.

Every state has a weather zone – for example here in North Carolina, we have three regions and they are quite different. I would describe the mountain areas as being somewhat like Ohio weather conditions. They see snow on a regular basis in February.

It is not like this in other regions of the U.S. being hit with bad winter weather -- California and the snow states from Oregon to Maine. Could those Artic flows suddenly move in our direction? I have seen frost in Southern Georgia at this time of the year and freezes to orange trees in Florida.

Beekeeping techniques must be adapted to weather conditions!

This year beekeepers here are looking at hives overflowing with bees. The bees are reacting as they should to weather conditions. Nectar and pollen is available in vast quantities.

I read beekeeping blogs to stay current with bee management practices.

Commercial beekeepers in Texas are talking about the schedules they have used to raise queens in the past. Normally they would be waiting another two weeks. And here I am in North Carolina acting and keeping bees like I did in Georgia in January of past years.

I am trying to keep up with my bees. I have put supers on bee hives already -- they need room for expanding bee populations. Thus, I am adjusting my bee “things to do list” to deal with current weather conditions.

IMPORTANT POINTS

The condition of a colony of bees as we see them this week depends largely upon the care given to the bees in the preceding autumn and in the method of wintering.

As this bee season opens some beekeepers find hives dead. There will be a need to order bees to restart the hive.

It is the nature of humans to be in a hurry to buy package bees for early delivery or to make an early split.

Early queens raised in late winter face a number of issues. The major issue of queen failure is poor mating of queens due to lack of required drone populations.

A good queen is only as good as the bees she produces!

If I were working for extracted honey, I suppose the swarming matter might be managed, to a great extent , if to the fullest extent, by simply giving abundance of room in every direction!

C.C. Miller on swarming

My concern is that weather conditions can turn on a dime! If what I do now because the weather is warm may come back to haunt me when and if the weather turns to Ohio like winter conditions. Something like a snow that doesn't go away in a day or two or a hard freeze that affects all blooming and tender plants.

The biggest gamble in beekeeping is "when is it time to make splits!"

My hives in January and early February looked like this:

Picture of hive Jan. 3, 2023



I had added a medium super of capped honey to provide the bees with plenty of food as brood rearing was gearing up. The bees were active bringing in pollen and nectar. The deep brood chamber had at that time three frames of brood and the medium super above it had some brood as well. I was concerned with the hive running short of food. I expected some winter weather in the future.

Winter weather showed up with one day of below freezing weather and that was it. Bees were flying by noon on most days and plants and trees were ahead of normal blooming times.

Normally I would be talking about building hive equipment for spring beekeeping. February was still in the future.

The same hive today February 23, 2023



53 days later

The hive is now 5 boxes high. All the things I normally do in spring are completed now. I reversed my brood chamber the green hive super was moved from the bottom to the top. The hive has a combined number of 15 brood frames with brood (eggs, larva, and capped cells). The combination entrance reducer/robbing screen has been removed. All the brood frames are centered for maximum heat control if the weather turns cold.

There is no queen excluder to confine the queen to a particular section of the hive. At this time, she can roam from top to bottom. This is my swarm control system. Outside the brood frames are new frames with foundation and they are checkerboarded with drawn comb frames -- many with honey.

See that old adage by C.C. Miller above "I suppose the swarming matter might be managed, to a great extent, if to the fullest extent, by simply giving abundance of room in every direction! "

I found out many years ago that just adding a box above the brood does not stop bees from swarming. Sure that is added room but that doesn't do what Miller says, "In every direction!"

Splits are on the mind of many beekeepers. Many mistakes can be avoided by waiting to make sure the weather will be stable to create splits. Right now weather patterns normally are like a roller coaster – temperatures fluxuating up and down. This could have a negative effect on a split with a small population of bees. Remember a nuc started from a hive in the same location as the mother hive will lose a number of older bees. They will return to the mother hive. This is why most bee books will say move nuc's more than 2 miles away.

The problems:

- Brood could be chilled due a lack of bees to keep the brood area covered with bees.
- It takes a lot of nurse bees and food to feed and raise a new queen properly.
- Weak nucs require more attention and help than a strong nuc with a laying queen.

Some pointers:

- Usually splits result in the loss of a honey crop when done early if the honey flow is over by early summer.
- Raising queens in late winter or early spring requires drones to be flying in numbers needed to mate with virgin queens. Queen failure is the reason those starting beekeeping early with package bees often fail.
- Splits made with mated queens develop much faster than those expected to raise their own queens.

I was talking with a new beekeeper friend a few days ago who had just finished her first bee school. She made a remark about "what was she to do?" She said, "There were different things said about how to keep bees! I am confused!"

Beekeeping is confusing! There are so many ways to manage a hive of bees. It all begins with the question: What are you wanting to get out of your bees? If anyone begins keeping bees with the idea that every question has a right or wrong answer – be ready to be confused!

To me swarming and making increases go hand in hand with getting a honey crop. If my bees swarm that will reduce the honey crop. If I make splits that will reduce the honey crop. So the issue boils down to how I go about managing my bee hives. I do not belong to that group of beekeepers that advocate "Let the bees swarm!"

Let me begin by saying, "I have never been able to prevent a hive from swarming if it makes up its mind to do it." For some bees it is in their DNA.

Every hive must be looked at as an individual. Hives are unique – some have good queens, some have bad queens, some have mites, and some – (I don't have the slightest idea of what is up with them.)

If you are lucky enough to live in Raleigh with record high temperatures this week, hives can be opened for inspection. I am not so much troubled by weak hives – they usually need feeding and TLC. (Tender Loving Care) I would do a regular mite check and if I find any mites – treat for them. Management for weak hives is to check to make sure a colony begins to build bee populations. As soon as new mated queens are available, I would requeen a weak hive if the current queen’s egg laying does not improve.

Increases:

For those beekeepers wanting to increase hive numbers, I would like to pass on a few thoughts.

It is entirely possible to increase hive numbers. There is also a point at which a beekeeper has too many hives! All of us are different! Anyone planning to grow hive numbers should have a plan in place. For too many years I was a “bee haver.” That is usually a negative term used to describe a person who doesn’t take care of his/her bees. In reality, I was taking care of my bees but because I had so many, each hive received little attention. I have come to believe that a person full time can manage no more than 500 colonies of bees without help.

Keeping honeybees is a time consuming activity if done right. One or two hives of bees is a comfortable fit for many. I am now at three. I could easily make these three into 15 hives this bee season. One often asks, “ How much time should I expect to spend working with a hive of bees?”

At one time the bees owned me! I was on a treadmill going as fast as I could – working morning to dark and always falling behind in what should be done. That is work not fun!

This week I had fun. I completely examined each frame in my three hives. I carried out a plan of comb management. I realized the bees were building up quickly and if I was to prevent swarming, the work to manage the bees had to be done this week. I like to do other things besides looking after my bees but if I want to keep bees – they require attention!

So I checked the time. I started at 1:00 (I like to work bees when they are flying and working). By 3:00 I was done. This included:

- Time to get and carry equipment from my shed to the bees
- Take mite counts
- Inspect frames and find the queens – my queens are marked so they are easy to spot
- Take each hive box off the hive down to the bottom board and then put the hive back together -- satisfied I had done no harm to the bees. I kept all brood frames together so the bees could cover all the brood in case the weather turns cold and I gave them room to expand.
- I made sure frames with honey – capped and uncapped frames were located near the cluster area.

Each hive received something like 30 minutes of my full attention and another 30 minutes was spent moving and handling equipment. I still had time to work in my garden and the yard and eat supper out with my wife. And I might add, time to work on this newsletter.

Let me share my goal for this year:

With three hives of bees I want to produce a honey crop. I live in an area with a large number of tulip Poplar Trees. If the weather allows, I am hoping to get 60 + pounds of honey from each hive. At the beginning of the honey flow I will move the queen and several frames of brood from each hive into nuc boxes. A large number of bees are required to harvest nectar. Brood and young bees do not collect nectar. But being queenless, the bees will build queen cells to replace the missing queen. I will share that story when the time arrives.

I then can make splits when I am extracting honey, the three hives will have new queens and large bee populations mostly bearding on the front of each hive. What do we do with all those bees hanging on the front of our hives will be a continuation of my story when I continue hive management.