



STAHLMAN

BEEKEEPING NOTES

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Published by Dana Stahlman Raleigh, North Carolina Email: stahlmanapiaries@aol.com
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Swarming is still an issue in the Raleigh area. Last week a friend called me to come over to his house. He had just watched a swarm land near the peak of his roof about 30 feet up from the ground. By the time I arrived most of the bees had moved inside the structure. I might mention that our friendship started this way about six or seven years ago, and at that time I advised him to find someone who could remove them. I don't have a ladder that will reach that high and wouldn't want to climb that high if I did. If I remember correctly, it cost about \$700.00 to get the bees removed. He is not a beekeeper but wants to save the bees. Most likely the earlier removal had left some wax attracting bees back to that location.

One of the most exciting moments in a new beekeepers life is finding and catching that first swarm. Almost any beekeeper one talks to will have a swarm story to share. Some are very funny. Like a story told to me by a new beekeeper that hived the same swarm four times. Seems like he had the technique down. The bees were located on a cedar tree branch no more than three feet above ground level. He shook the bees off the branch into a hive located directly below the swarm. Within minutes they gathered back on the tree branch. Three times this happened. Finally, on the fourth try, they stayed in the hive. He figured out the problem. The queen evidently was still on the branch and the bees returned to her.

One might find disappointment when capturing a swarm. Getting it, taking it home and putting it into a box is a success story. A check the next morning may find no bees in the hive. It does happen from time to time. A person a few years ago expressed the thought "those ungrateful bees." I gave them a home and they didn't stay.

Last week I used the word adaptable to describe honey bee behavior. A nice new wooden box with new wax comb may not be as attractive to honey bees as a human would desire. According to research done by Thomas Seeley the following information was found on pages 67 thru 72 of [HoneyBee Democracy](#).

- A scout bee needs 13 to 56 minutes to inspect a prospective nest site.
- It starts with what he calls "the discovery inspection".
- During the discovery inspection 75% of the time is spent walking across the inner surface with brief pauses during which the bee may release attraction pheromones from the scent organ.

- Cavity volume is the most critical factor in selecting a nesting site.

The critical decisions made by honey bees are remarkable when we consider their brain is so small. Thus, when I am asked “Why did the bees leave a perfect hive to enter some run down shack of a nesting site?”, I am left with only this answer: “The bees make decisions on their own” we can not tell them what to do. If a situation fits the “colonies needs” determined by the bees then that is how the bees will do what they do!

I have a ton of swarm photos. Bees settle in a variety of places prior to arrival at the final destination as I described above. The distance and flying condition of the queen bee often requires a swarm to stop for a short time before continuing to the final destination.



The swarm in this picture selected a tall pine tree to settle for a short period of time – usually not more than a day.

The problem for the person wanting this swarm is the height and risk involved in trying to capture it.

I wrote an article in 2019 titled “How to retrieve swarms from tall trees.” Ed Paris a fellow beekeeper and ham radio operator showed me how he did it. He used something called a “potato gun.” The idea was to shoot a lead fishing sinker with an attached fishing line up and over the branch holding the swarm. Then in several steps the fishing line was used to pull a stronger rope up and over the branch. Once a strong rope was in place, he could attach a five gallon bucket or box with some drawn honey frames to the rope. Pull the rope to place the comb close to the swarm and when the swarm had moved to the comb, all he had to do was lower the swarm to the ground. The lead fishing weight when shot over the branch would return to the ground so he then had control of both ends of the rope.



Some swarms pick locations so they can be easily captured. Most swarms land in trees owned by someone else. Do not think of cutting a branch from a tree like this without the owners permission. There is room to place a hive body with frames directly below this swarm. All that is required is a good strong shake of the limb and the bees drop to the box below. If the queen is dropped along with most of the bees, the swarm capture will be successful and quick.

Bees can select challenging locations. I saw a report on the evening news a few weeks ago of a swarm that settled in a ball park shutting down the game until the swarm was removed.



This swarm selected a car with an open window. Those white bees are a result of trying to lighten the picture so you could see the bees collecting on the center console between the front seats. In a situation such as this a shop vac comes in handy. A low pressure bee vac will save bees and capture the swarm. A standard high pressure shop vac will kill many of the bees one collects. Thus, I don't recommend the standard bee vac. The owner of the car may have a different opinion.

A frame with comb could be placed on the console so that bees could gather on it and hopefully the queen would also move onto the frame. This method was used in the swarm capture story which follows. I have found frames with comb very useful in gathering bees from flat surfaces or locations which could not be moved such as a lamp post. A swarm lure might also come in handy in a case like this.

If one builds a swarm trap, a swarm may come to you if the trap is properly placed and bee hives are located near. I am including a newsletter that some of the new readers of these notes might find interesting about swarms. [Issue # 17 April 2021](#) has information about a swarm caught and moved from a swarm box to a hive

The following comments by a neighbor beekeeper may sum up what it is like to get that first swarm. Four years ago I opened my mail box and found a note from Sharon Schwinger who lives in my neighborhood. She had observed my bee hives and was interested in beekeeping. Long story short – she has had typical problems from the get-go. It has been fun watching her grow into keeping bees. She found that it requires work with some disappointment, along the way.

All pictures below are Sharon's. I was given permission to share them with you.



I caught my first swarm this week! My friend, neighbor and bee mentor, Dana Stahlman, asked if I would write a little something about the experience. This May will be the start of my 4th year as a beekeeper. Every spring I feel like I have no knowledge retained from last season until I get into my hive and am excited that I did in fact remember some things! Last year I had one hive fail and one hive overwintered well. This was my first time on swarm lists. I'm currently on 2 lists and prior to this week's swarm I'd been called up for a swarm from each list. The first call had the bees leave as soon as I pulled up. I was so heartbroken to see them flying overhead! Swarm captain Ben Crawley and I walked around the block a little to see if we could find where they went but no luck. I came home very disappointed. A few days later, I got a call from another swarm captain, Ray Raynor, and off I went with tools and stepladder. Most of the bees were already gone by the time we got there, too! Once again, I left sad and empty handed.

This week there was another call from Ben Crawley and when I arrived, there was a big swarm circle on the ground! I put my box and some frames off to the side and made a bridge with a frame that had terrible condition comb. This comb had just come out of the freezer because it had wax moth damage and was really awful looking. The bees didn't care! They started marching right up the frame into the box. When that frame was full of bees, I put it in the box and took out another frame. While they were walking up the ladder, I had more frames out on 2 sides of the circle, so the removal went a little faster. I was scooping bees to move into the box and looking for the queen at the same time. She was running in a pile pretty close to where I was scooping so I put her in a clip in the box and kept moving the rest of the girls with my hands and old frames. It took about an hour and a half from start to finish but I was able to fill out a good portion of a 10 frame hive body. The homeowner was a really sweet lady that kept moving bee by bee into the box. She spoke to the bees the entire removal and stayed there until every lady little bee was saved. It is awesome that she wasn't scared at all.



This makes beekeeping so rewarding! You will notice that Sharon belongs to a club with a swarm list and swarm captains for various areas of the city. Her membership fee was more than paid for with this swarm capture and the help she received from Wake County Beekeepers Association members.

If you are wanting to collect swarms, here are suggestions:

- Keep comb frames handy just in case you get a call like this “Can you help us – there is a swarm in my yard!”
- Two important questions to ask the person who calls. “How long have the bees been there and are they easy to reach?”
- Make sure you have available equipment.

Bees will not wait for you to get them. They have a place to go.