



STAHLMAN BEEKEEPING NOTES

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Rain and more Rain And Robbing

Have you checked your hives lately? Robbing has been a serious problem this year.



I was asked “Why do honeybees rob honey from other hives?”
Have you ever asked what you would do if you needed food and had no money to buy it? Food is required for survival!

Honeybees struggle for survival all the time. Problem is if a hive is weak, it provides other bees an open invitation to take what honey it has. It does not have enough guard bees to defend itself. Many beekeepers do not discover a hive has been robbed until they open a hive and find no honey and no bees in it.

If a hive is idle because the bees cannot find sources of pollen and nectar, they either hang out on the outside of the hive or seek other places to get sweet rewards. Bird feeders or any sweet substance with sugar becomes a target. Bees can communicate and when a bee returns to the hive with food this signals other bees in the hive that food is available. The location of the reward is shared with other bees in the hive.

Generally near-by-hives will be the robbing bees, but yellow jackets, hornets and ants can also rob a hive. One should be aware that feeding a weak hive is exposing that hive to robbers. Entrances should be reduced so only a few bees can pass into and out of the hive. Feeding can also be done later in the day. Spilling sugar syrup near a hive is sure to attract other bees. And keeping a hive open for a long period of time will allow other bees to inspect and attack that hive.

Robbing has been described as far back as humans have written about honeybees. It is not something new.

There are three stages of robbing;

1. Bees discover they can enter a hive with little resistance. Bees do drift at times from one hive to another. Guard bees defending the hive usually stop unwelcome visitors.
2. The second stage is called the battle stage. If you see bees fighting at the entrance of a hive, the battle is on. I have actually helped start robbing by working my hives when they were hungry. Bees in a bee yard may follow the beekeeper from one hive to another and surely the beekeeper will notice the bee activity in the air. This is one reason bees become somewhat aggressive later in the bee season. Normal behavior is bee's flying in and out of an entrance. Some bees returning with pollen and nectar. Once one sees a large gathering of bees at only one hive and a lot of flight activity going into the hive -- the battle is on. It is almost impossible to stop it.
Note: Young bees take orientation flights that may appear to be a sign of robbing but it only last for a short period of time. Robbing continues until the attacked hive has no honey left to rob.
3. The third stage is surrender – the bees in the hive provide no defense and are resigned to accept the invasion. Many of the bees in the robbed hive drift to other hives. The beekeeper finds no bees or a queen left in the hive. Many are dead or leave the hive.

There is no effective way to stop robbing once it begins. The best management one can do is make sure all bee hives have robbing screens on them and any weak hives are moved to locations with far less bee hive numbers. Weak nuc hives mixed with strong hives is a bad situation. Those building up nucs for sale and those raising queens late in the season face a continuous battle with robbing bees.

Thus, the management tips I have are:



- If you are feeding bees, do not spill sugar syrup outside any colony. Feeding bees with internal or top feeders is preferred to entrance feeders. In fact, do not use entrance feeders during robbing periods in the bee season. Open feeding as shown here encourages robbing.

- If robbing is an issue, you want to address this by providing robbing screens and reduced entrances to the hives.

- All equipment should be tight. Loose fitting equipment that allows bees to enter or exit are openings that robbing bees will use to get into a hive.

- The health and condition of your hives is important. Check for failing queens and

examine brood frames for problems. Treat for varroa mites. You can adjust the size of opening in the entrance to fit the strength of the hive.

- Blocking the entrance to a hive in hot weather will kill the bees inside the hive if they have no ventilation to carry away the heat.
- Moving a hive before much damage is done may help the hive being robbed. Don't worry about foraging bees lost. They most likely were in the hive to protect it.

- One trick I learned from my father and uncle was to go through the beeyard with robbing going on and remove the top covers of all the hives in the beeyard. Bees needed to stay at home to protect their own hive.
- Another trick I have used successfully was to place a frame of honey on the ground where a hive I moved was being robbed. Robbing bees will continue to return to the old hive location rather than follow the moved hive. The moved hive can still be left in the bee yard but a wire screen across the entrance keeps all robbers out and give the bees in the hive being robbed a break. Some individuals recommend putting a bed sheet over a hive being robbed. It will work for the moved hive but it will not help a weak hive not moved. The bees will return for some time back to that location until there is no honey to be found. Then, they will renew the search for another hive.