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Barry's Bees

Preserving Bees for Our Future

MARCH NEWS LETTER

Topics for this News Letter

Spring Inspection, Supplementary pollen feed, Winter Honey, Varroa Treatment
Jobs to complete in March

As the harsh winter weather slowly loses its grip and our winter season starts to come to an end, we see daylight hours extending, warmer days appearing much more frequently and the bees becoming more active within the colony. The bee keeper should be focusing on the season ahead and planning for the start of the colony expansion, what to do to recover the inevitable winter losses and thinking of the first major honey flow. As well of course not forgetting swarm prevention and Varroa control. A busy time, and we are just entering March.

Early anticipation of your colony's health and strength are crucial in planning the rest of the season and the subjects mentioned above. Select a suitably warm day to break open the hive for your first inspection. Conduct this in the normal manner- quickly, methodically and without unnecessary exposure of the brood or colony to the cold. Check what stores are left, consider supplementary pollen/fondant feed to help them along and don't be afraid to treat for Varroa.

Importantly, record your findings on a new season hive record card including treatment serial numbers. Leave the winter hive protection in place for now just in case the weather deteriorates.



Above – First post winter inspection of overwintered Langstroth Poly Nuc. Supplementary feed given.



Left and Right – Hazel, Alder and Willow catkins are an important early source of pollen for the bees.

Ensuring your bees are strong enough to capitalise on these first pollen flows is important.

Catkins and fruit blossoms are essential to the colony survival.



Spring Inspection:-This should really only occur when the weather is significantly warm enough to allow the colony to be opened for a short period of time. Open the hive using the absolute minimum of smoke, if you need to, as too much smoke will panic the bees and send them flying. Ensure the inspection follows a logical sequence that you stick too! Keep the inspection methodical, quick and with purpose. If the weather is just too cold, then delay this initial inspection.

What to look for:-Gauge how much food/stores are left in the frames, how many frames are the bees covering, are they “queen right” and how many patches/frames of brood are present. Is there any sign of Varroa or other diseases present?

Remember to record all the information you observe on a new season record card including treatment and feeds given. Close up the colony and leave all the winter protection in place.

Conclusion:- The initial inspection **is not a detailed one**. Don't spend ages searching for the queen, if there are eggs or brood present then so is the queen. “Move On” and complete the task.



Left -First spring inspection of bees

Right – Supplementary pollen feed to ensure colony builds quickly

Supplementary Pollen Feed:- Not every beekeeper believes in the necessity to feed the bees pollen substitute in spring. In fact I know of some who positively frown at the mere mention of it. However, it really depends on your circumstance as a beekeeper and what you are trying to achieve with the bees. Those slightly more commercially minded beekeepers need their colonies as strong as possible to either capitalise on a major honey flow (oil seed rape),or have them strong enough for queen rearing or maybe it's to fulfil a pollination contract as is my situation. Whatever your reason, we must face the fact that our countryside, habitat, climate and how we manage the bees have all changed and we must as beekeepers adapt to meet those changes.

If giving the bees pollen substitute replaces the early spring flowers we once had or the bees access to early catkins around a village pond, or fruit blossom from the local fruit farms that have long since gone; then I am all for it!

We need to do what is right for the bees after all we created the situation....

Benefits:- The substitute allows the bees to start and support earlier brood production; this aids the colony's recovery from its natural winter losses. It ensures the colony's bee numbers build up giving them enough foragers to collect early nectar and pollen when these become available. It allows the beekeeper to manage colony expansion and manipulate the colony to prevent swarming. It gives the beekeeper the option of creating further colonies (Splits)

Drawbacks:- Early production of bees means early production and expansion of Varroa. The queen starts laying earlier than normal and therefore will lay herself “Out” quicker than may be expected. In some areas hive beetle can take hold in the colony with the introduction of the pollen substitutes.

There are many different types of pollen substitute on the market and it is up to the individual to decide what to use and if to use it at all.

Winter Honey:- Don't overlook winter honey in frames that hasn't been consumed by the bees, it can still have its uses. If the beekeeper can be sure it hasn't become contaminated during the treatment process for Varroa especially the "vaporizing processes" of treatments, it could be spun off. But more commonly it could be uncapped and used as a stores frame for a newly established colony or swarm. Or used as an outer insulator frame for a new nucleus. The simple process of uncapping the frame and replacing it in the colony may also encourage the bees to use it.

Varroa Treatments:- Varroa destructor mite, is the single biggest threat to the honey bee that I have witnessed in 40 years of bee keeping. Early detection, intervention and treatment of the colony are a must. If the mite numbers are allowed to escalate, the knock on effect to the colony can be devastating. The colony will start to collapse and become susceptible to all number of viruses, diseases and fungal infestations.

Early treatment:- Start treating as soon as the brood expansion within the colony gets going. Mix up the treatments throughout the season. Don't stick to one type of treatment as this encourages mite resistance. Monitor your mite populations throughout the season. Methodically record all your findings on a record card including any treatments given and the respective serial numbers.



Jobs to Complete in March

1. Conduct initial spring inspection of the colony to confirm it's survival, overall health, potential growth and food reserves Record your findings on a hive record card. Consider the use of pollen substitute or fondant to help the bees expand. Look at what old frames need replacing and ensure they are changed on the next in-depth inspection.
2. If brood is present and the colony is showing signs of expanding, treat for varroa. Remember to record types of treatment given, serial and batch numbers. Ensure the bees, queen and brood are in the lower brood box and place on the queen excluder. Ensure the bees have storage and expansion room as they will need it very soon.
3. Ensure the hive entrance is still protected with a mouse guard and remove any weather protection to the outer hive, weather permitting! Remove any vermin protection like chicken wire. Clean and store all weather sheeting and vermin protection ready for the following winter.
4. Ensure you have varroa floors cleaned and ready to use, if you have overwintered on solid floors. Ensure you have sufficient new frames with foundation to replace the old. Prepare any new hives or Nuc to be used later on and position them beforehand. Ensure you have feeders and sugar to mix up to syrup for drawing frames out.

Brace yourself it's going to get really busy!!