



Kent Bee-Keepers Association

County Newsletter No 91

April 2021

Easter snow showers...

It is still a bit chilly outside!

Spring is almost here - really! This cool spell has dragged on for ages since the false start at the beginning of February.

This has to be one of the most risky times for the bee colony. Once they start raising brood, they have to try and maintain the brood nest at about 34C, whereas when broodless the middle of the cluster only needs to be at about 20C to keep the bees alive and slightly mobile.

“Turning the heating up” for brooding causes the fuel consumption to rocket - and that means that stores can suddenly start to go down very quickly indeed.

The Spring blossom might be showing, but when daytime temperatures struggle to reach double figures, there isn't going to be much nectar produced, or many bees foraging.

Hence the beekeepers' truism that colonies don't starve to death in December, but sadly they can and do in Spring!

If you feel that a colony is 'light' (hefting the box indicating that it feels pretty empty), you are going to do the bees less harm by a quick check in non-ideal conditions (and feeding if required) than by crossing your fingers until the weather gets warmer and hoping that they can hang on that long.

Don't just act blindly - excess stores occupy brood-box space that will very soon be needed for a mushrooming brood nest. Cramp the brood nest with too much stores and you will be promoting swarming.

It is possible to steer a safe course between starvation and crowding, but you need info on which to base your decisions. If you aren't confident that you can tell the stores situation by 'hefting', the least dangerous thing is to take a quick look at the frames.

If the stores are running low, less than a full frame in total, then they could do with a kilo or so of sugar, whether as syrup or fondant, simply to see them through until you can next check them.

If the bees had 20kg of honey going into Winter, at 20% water that is 16kg of sugar. Thus an extra 1kg of sugar is therefore only about a 6% bonus ration, so don't be mean - save them from starving if there is any danger!

Many 'old hands' would feed anyway (with weak syrup and possibly a pollen patty too) as a Spring stimulant, to encourage the colony to brood and build for a better Spring honey crop.

..and Watering Places

Where to get a drink?

Another thing that you may notice on good days in Spring is that the bees have a prodigious thirst. There are two reasons - diluting stored honey for consumption and building baby bees! Like us, bees by weight are mostly water. While we are aware of the need for protein to build the structure of new bees, we can easily overlook their parallel need for water.

Water foraging is the most dangerous task for workers to undertake, and accordingly it is done by the oldest (and so least valuable) workers.

Bees carry water in their crop or "honey stomach", which importantly is located in their abdomen. That means that the water has to pass *through the thorax* to get to the crop. Now because that water is going to be cold at this time of year, it will cool the flight muscles that pack the thorax - and those muscles need to be warm to move fast enough for flight - hence the bee risks becoming chilled, unable to fly and thus stranded away from the hive, a death sentence.

We can minimise this risk by providing water in the safest way we can. Making sure that the bees have access to water that is in a sunny spot is the first priority. You might need to have one watering hole that catches the morning sun and another that gets it in the afternoon - the bees will work that out instantly!

Putting water in a dark (black?) container will maximise any heating by the sun, making the water less chilling. Providing a safe wet 'beach' where the bees can drink without risk of 'falling in' is good. Bees are happier 'drinking' from moss or suchlike rather than open water. And if the bees can rely on a safe water supply in a particular position, they will make great use of it, so keep it topped up and don't let it run dry.

A black plastic bucket, some weed-suppressing membrane and a few bricks can create a splendid temporary "water feature" that your bees will appreciate and gratefully use.

Bees collecting water are very focussed on the task in hand, and thus give you a great opportunity to observe them at work from very close up. You might even mark and identify some, so you can see just how quickly those individuals return!

Oh, and don't forget...

We wish success to all our BBKA Module exam candidates, who will be doing their exams online this month. Thinking ahead to the next exam sitting in the Autumn, it is to be hoped that we can use our new-found facility with Zoom and the like to extend our study groups county-wide. If you are planning to take an exam in the Autumn, or to run a Study Group, please get in touch with the Newsletter and let us see if we can use this link to get people with common interests together, as separation by geography has become less of a barrier.

The Zoom 'Not Lenham' KBKA Lectures were well received and are now available on YouTube for anyone that missed them. The link is <https://youtu.be/b1LiThBG9ZI>

The online BBKA Spring Convention will start very soon - April 15th to 18th. Register before the start to get the £10 offer! <https://springconvention.bbka.org.uk>

Although the outlook for Shows is "uncertain", the KBKA Shows Committee is keen to recruit more volunteers. In the first instance contact our President and Show Committee Chair, Bob Smith via email at bobsmith4945@gmail.com

If you've got this far, well done, but read on for our Varroa survey, a rather good use for honey and a BBKA call to action. Your updated list of KBKA Contacts is on the last page.

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Varroa Survey

a KBKA attempt at some citizen science

if we can gather data from many Kent beekeepers, we might get an indication of when would have been a good or bad time to do that Oxalic treatment

So, you are being asked to do a drop count in the next week or so, and submit your results!

BUT if you have already given an additional Spring treatment or treated in Winter with a different product, PLEASE DON'T complete the survey!

Many of us will have done a midwinter anti-varroa treatment with a treatment based on Oxalic Acid (such as Api-Bioxal, Oxuvar, Oxybee, Varromed or even Dany's Bienenwohl!) However, its effectiveness depends greatly on there being no (sealed) brood at the time of treatment - which is why we do it in midwinter! Any sealed brood provided a safe shelter for some varroa, which will now be starting to multiply as the brood nest starts to get going properly.

Since it isn't easy to check broodlessness without pulling frames out, it is interesting to try and discover if there is any connection between *when* the bees were treated and the *effectiveness* of the treatment - as measured by an April Varroa drop count - which you are being asked to measure, now!

To make things as easy as possible, a web-page form has been created where we can all enter our drop counts (many thanks to Canterbury Branch for web-hosting the survey and to Adrian Davis for the magic behind it.)

The important data are the date of Oxalic treatment and the mid-April average drop count. Please count the varroa drop over several (at least 4) days - and divide the total by the number of whole days to get the daily rate.

If you can do it on more than one hive (treated on the same day), and then average those, that is even better. Simply add up the hive-averages and divide by the number of hives checked.

Just to identify each result, you are also asked to also give your residential (not necessarily apiary) postcode *area* and (in case of neighbouring beekeepers), a first name or other individual identifier. You can also indicate how the treatment was applied and leave any additional notes or comments you might care to.

The data entry form is at <https://tinyurl.com/kbkavarroa21> or use <https://canterburybeekeepers.org.uk/kent-bka-data-form/>

So please clean off your inspection boards, get them in asap, and get a count to enter on that page! To get comparable results, **the survey will close on April 26th**, and no more data will be able to be entered after that.

Hopefully, we can collect plenty of results and show how they stack up in the next newsletter.

The Bee's Knees

This is one of those stories that definitely needs a health warning. Or perhaps two! It may not be good for you and the background story just might, or might not, be true.

Having survived the sinking of the Titanic and having come into a considerable fortune, Mrs J J (Margaret) Brown then went on to grow old gracefully (or perhaps disgracefully) in the Paris of the Roaring Twenties. And it was at that stage of her life that "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" is credited (by some) with the creation of The Bee's Knees - a cocktail recipe that deserves a wider audience as we approach a new post-lockdown 'roaring twenties', and particularly among Beekeepers wanting to celebrate the joys of Spring!

Incidentally, it was only in the 1920's that the phrase 'Bees Knees' had come to mean 'best'. Before that it had meant 'tiny' or even 'nothing'. And actually, Mrs Brown wasn't just keen on having fun. She was awarded the French Legion d'Honneur for her philanthropy and activism in assisting post-WWI recovery, though perhaps creating the "Bees Knees" might just have been what was needed to clinch the award!

Fancy a quick knee-trembler?

Anyway, here's the recipe -

Put ice in a cocktail shaker (beekeepers should be used to improvising!)

add 2 fl oz (55ml) of Gin

then 3/4 fl oz (20ml) of honey (or honey syrup, see below) and the same quantity of lemon juice

some might say a little orange juice should be there too

Shake hard for 10 seconds or so, and pour into one or more glasses, straining out the ice.

Garnish with lemon, grapefruit, rosemary, lavender or whatever takes your fancy.

To help the honey mix more quickly and easily, it can be loosened with a little warm water to make a 'honey syrup' and then fridge-cooled before mixing.

After a couple of Bee's Knees, you just might find yourself demonstrating the waggle dance... but please note that KBKA declines all responsibility for such actions.

Bottoms up! (As Nasonov said...)

Bee Imports and trying to get round the restrictions

Perhaps you noticed in the national press, on BBC TV or ITV, or elsewhere that Patrick Murfitt, a local Kent bee entrepreneur, has been having some difficulty importing bee colonies from Italy, via Ireland. He seems to have successfully sought rather a lot of publicity for his efforts.

In previous years, one could *legally* import bees from the EU, and many commercially interested parties have done so - finding a profitable market and an easy sale. The earlier Southern Spring means that colonies can be available earlier in the season than British-sourced bees - clearly a commercial advantage for a pollination contract or a Spring honey crop. And after all, simply buying bees early in Spring saves all that fuss about carefully overwintering one's existing colonies, and keeping spare nucs or otherwise making increase to cover one's minimised Winter losses... Why bother with all that when you can simply buy some more when you need them? Time is money when there's a business to run!

However the BBKA, representing Britain's hobby beekeepers, has long been asking the Government to ban these bee imports on bio-security grounds - which the Government had previously refused to do, claiming (though widely considered wrongly) that EU rules didn't allow an import ban, even to exclude those from countries infested with statutory pests.



Photo: Crown Copyright

Small Hive Beetle, a terribly dangerous bee pest, has so far still not been successfully eradicated from Italy - having been found there back in 2014. Despite draconian measures (including the burning of hundreds of hives - not just frames), the Beetle is, as expected, proving very hard (perhaps impossible) to eliminate. We really don't want it here!

Now that we have left the EU, the Government's excuse has disappeared, and an import ban has at long last been imposed - though importation of Queens is still legally permitted. While there is less chance of Small Hive Beetle escaping detection in a Queen cage than in a 'package' of thousands of bees, our BBKA's approach is that no importation is 'necessary' and all is undesirable. In any case the best adapted bee for local conditions would be a local bee, not one differentiated by its genetic evolution and adaptation to a foreign environment.

KBKA members should not be needing to buy bees. "Making increase" isn't hard - most hobby beekeepers have the opposite problem - limiting their compounding number of colonies.

Accordingly, it shouldn't be difficult to find someone in your branch with surplus healthy bees needing a new home. Our beginners should be discouraged from buying bees from commercial sources, and particularly where they cannot get a written declaration that the bees have come from British stock and are not imported.

Many branches favour the diversion of club-member taken bee swarms to trained beginners. This seems a sensible policy, not least because a beginner is going to be providing an 'isolation apiary' where the swarm can be assessed without any disease risk to other colonies. It also avoids the beginners' heartbreak of discovering that their expensive recently-bought Queen has, all too soon, departed with her own swarm! While a 'taken swarm' shouldn't be seen as a profit opportunity, it is probably a sensible basis for the beginner to reimburse any expenses directly incurred by the collector. If the bees are provided completely free, the beginner may not value them and fail to care for them appropriately!

Assisting any members with 'problem bees' to re-queen from better stock ought to be high on the list of branch aims. It is only by removing the worst genes from the area that we can 'improve' our own stocks. Queens can fly miles to mate, and it is in our own interests to improve their chances of meeting better Drones, and fewer representatives of the sort of colony that we wouldn't want for our own!

Just as being generous with surplus decent Queens is simply enlightened self-interest, so it is in our own interests to discourage others from buying imported Queens, and thus we can reduce the representation of non-local genetics in the Drone population that our Virgin Queens will mate with.

Whether or not Mr Murfitt succeeds in his efforts to (quite literally) get around the import ban by bringing his imports into the UK across the land border from Ireland, (the Channel Tunnel and Dover being closed to bee colony imports), it is to be hoped that hobby beekeepers will not accidentally buy them without thinking to ask for a declaration that the bees were truly native stock and not extremely recent arrivals.

Self-sufficiency
is in our own
self-interest

The BBKA has rightly been highly exercised on this matter, mustering a united front with the Welsh, Scottish and Ulster BKA's to oppose any circumvention of the import ban.

One typical joint Press Release can be found at <https://www.bbka.org.uk/news/serious-risk-of-exotic-bee-pest-being-imported>

The BBKA is also urging all its members (and anyone else they can convince) to sign a petition to the Government, urging the proper enforcement of the existing ban on all such imports originating from regions posing bio-security risks to the bees of Britain.

The petition wording is simple and straightforward -

The UK Government should ensure that people cannot circumvent restrictions on the movement of bees from the EU to GB by moving them via NI. Unrestricted movement of bees could allow Small Hive Beetle to arrive and devastate British beekeeping.

All BBKA members are encouraged to visit <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/577603> and to sign this petition promptly.

If you have already signed, thank you. Now, go and get a few more people to sign!

It has already reached the threshold that requires an official Government reply, but more signatures are needed to force a debate in Parliament.

Please sign
the petition -
today
Now!

Your KBKA Officers and Contacts for 2021

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Newsletter submissions are always very welcome!