

Extreme Swarm Collecting!

This swarm had arrived some while ago in the tree at the bottom of John Mason's parent's garden. John offered to collect them even though he hadn't collected an established colony before, and certainly nothing at this height.

This is his account of his experiences:

I didn't really know how this compared to an average extraction as this was my first one. Thankfully the site was familiar to me being my parent's garden, which came with the added advantage that I could make use of their ladders and gardening tools, saving on what I needed to bring with me.

I had been over to assess a couple of days before when I had been told about a 'swarm' in one of their trees. I was fairly confident, given the time of year, and shape, that it wasn't just a swarm but actually a colony so arrived prepared with a nucleus and some super frames pre-strung with fishing wire as John Farrow had suggested.



The bees had helpfully decided that almost the highest branch of a spindly, intertwined Damson tree would be a good spot to set up home, making access a challenge. This is however where it being in a relative's garden helped again, as asking the question "You don't mind if I have to chop a few branches off the tree do you?" is easier when you know it was a wild self-sown tree before you ask.

As this was my first collection from a ladder I kitted up at this point, as I wasn't sure how the bees would react to me potentially bashing the tree with a ladder as I tried to make my ascent. It was at this point I discovered my first mistake. Somehow, I had managed to arrive with two left gloves! It

was however late in the afternoon so I forced my right hand into the other glove and pressed on. I had to remove several branches from the tree to enable me to lay the ladder in a place that was secure enough for me to ascend to the top. Having climbed to the top of the ladder I discover my second issue. The ladder really wasn't tall enough to allow me to work on the colony safely, but again I wasn't really inclined to go home, get my ladder on the car, and come back. So looking at the tree I decided that if I took a couple of small branches off of the crown I would be left with a three pronged Y-shaped area of branches that I was happy would probably hold my weight. Having made myself a sitting space I carefully manoeuvred off the ladder and into the tree, unfortunately in doing so I managed to rip a hole in the palm of my right glove! I told myself that given I am right handed I would nearly always be holding a tool of some sort in my right hand covering the hole so pressed on.

It was a lovely location with a beautiful view of the setting sun (not that the bees care much for sunsets I guess) and I am sure would have caught the morning sun too, but seemed completely unprotected for when the weather changed and became colder with wind and rain. I pruned back as much foliage as I could that emerged from the colony, leaving just the main branch and a few stragglers that I couldn't really reach safely from my position sitting some 6m (19.5ft) up the tree. The remaining branch was about 6cm (2-3 inches) across meaning the loppers I had brought up with me were not going to do the job. So given the bees were still very calm, my eldest (James) kindly climbed the ladder to hand me a pruning saw. I held the branch just below the colony with my left hand and sawed through the branch carefully. I was then able to cautiously get back on to the ladder and descend to the ground holding the branch and colony as I went!



When sawing through the branch and subsequently climbing down the bees had decided to start climbing off the comb and onto the branch leaving the comb exposed. As you can see from the photo they had made 6 sections of comb and all three of the large ones had reasonable amounts of brood in. I went to transfer the bees to the nucleus and without thinking used the same technique I had used to transfer the couple of swarms I had previously caught. I gently bashed the branch against the top of the nucleus causing one of the large pieces of comb to drop into the bottom of the nucleus along with only a small number of the bees. This left me with the challenge of getting the bee covered comb back out of the nucleus. At which point I remembered the hole I had made in my glove earlier! Thankfully I managed to cover this with my thumb whilst lifting the comb. When all trimmed to fit the frames, I got two super frames full of brood. Once the frames were in the nucleus, I was able to give the branch a good shake over the nuc and most of the rest of the bees dropped off. With the lid back on the bees came

out and gave a great display of fanning at the entrance of the nucleus giving me hope that everything was well and over the next half an hour as I cleared up, the bees left outside made their way into the hive.



An examination of the remaining comb showed that they had no food stored at all, capped or open. They did have some pollen so I left the spare comb in a tub near the nucleus for the time being. I have made up some syrup and added that to the nucleus to support the colony as I suspect they will struggle to find much of their own now. I am getting regular reports of activity at the door of the hive from my parents so all looks good. It also appears that it might become their forever home as I am told an area has now been cleared where a hive can be placed should I wish to keep them at the bottom of my parent's long garden.

I can only assume that they are a very docile group of bees given the rough treatment I am sure I gave them. They seemed very relaxed about the whole thing and the only sting I received was because I managed to kneel on one. That said I was still very impressed with James, my son, (particularly given his clothing), who requested his photo was taken to show his teachers.

So what have I learnt from my first colony collection? Without a doubt more than I have space here to write, but importantly that the bees remained much calmer than I had imagined they would given I was chopping up their home. That I probably could have done much of the ground work before fully suiting up, which would have been much easier, but most of all, check you have a **pair** of gloves before leaving the house!

John Mason - September 2021

**[John is a Lab. Technician at Radnor House School, Sundridge,
who also helps to look after their school bees.]**