

January Beekeeping

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If you want to be a good beekeeper, you need to be thinking about your bees all year round. Once upon a time we could close our hives in September and not worry about them until the following March and all this was possible with little or no losses.

Today we have several issues that make it very difficult to maintain your number over the winter. Varroa will always be a factor but most of the deaths are attributed to bad beekeeping practices and you are the main contributor. January is the month we should start to think of our bees. There is always something to be done. It doesn't matter whether you have one, ten or a hundred hives the same theory applies to each. Let's start with some simple, armchair jobs. Now is the time to review last season and learn from your mistakes and start to plan for this year. You will always need new equipment, frames and foundations should be changed over every year.

If you are expanding it is better to buy the equipment before the season starts, no point in looking for foundation when the nuc needs to be expanded. Support our local bee suppliers but no harm in looking on the web at the January sales. Continue with your armchair reading, you'll never know enough about bees.



Figure 1 Fondant Feeding over the Feed Hole

Stick to the basics as bees don't change their habits so no need for any fancy manipulations.

On the practical side you need to get out and check that your hives are ok. Always check after weather extremes, wind can blow over hives, heavy rain can flood an area. A quick check at a distance will do especially if the weather is very cold. Bee cluster during cold spell to conserve heat and avoid overeating. If you are walking around the hives the vibration will alert the bees and may upset the cluster. When you get a warm day 10-12°C and we do get days like that even in January the bees will be going out on cleansing flights, collecting water and possible collecting the first of the pollen. Now you can approach the hive, have a look at the entrance to check there is no evidence of excess debris, a sure sign you have a mouse in the hive. Rats will nibble at the timber work, watch for signs of that. When the rats get in the hive should be burnt. Lift the hive on all sides and judge if they need to be fed, at this time of year you feed fondant or one of those new products advertised in bee magazines. When you are hefting take off the roof will give you a better idea of the weight, again reminding you

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that this should only be done when the bees are flying. Also place your hand on the crown board to check for heat which will tell you where the bees are clustering and if they are a long way from the opening in the crown board you may need to remove it if they need feeding. Remember they are flying now so they could reach the fondant if left over the opening but if temp drops, they will not get back to it and could starve. This is known as isolation starvation. They have the food but cannot move towards it. If feeding under the crown



Figure 2 Water Drinker note sand in trough to prevent bees from drowning

board you will probably need an eke about 25 mm high. While you have the roof off check for water ingress and if an issue replace it. Another very important job is to put in your inserts to check for varroa count. Leave in for 5-7 days and take out counting the total number of varroa. Divide by the number of inserted days and that gives your daily mite drop. If greater than two you need to treat with Apibioxal, this needs to be done early January as the queen will be starting to lay as the days get

longer. Day light probably has a bigger influence of the start of egg laying rather than ambient weather conditions. Inserts are also a good way of assessing the overall condition of your colony. Colony activity will be evident by the lines of debris left along the length of the insert. If you have a few rows of debris, it indicates a few rows of bees. White crystals mean they are working on the solid honey, brown wax particles indicate that the cell are opening as the young bees hatch, of course you wouldn't expect to see too much of that right now. Chalk brood mummies are usually evident white or blue grey colour, a few is ok if excessive take note and follow up during the spring inspection. If you only have a small patch of debris your colony probably hasn't enough bee to survive until spring inspection. It is a good practice to compare one colony to the next. Make an assessment and keep that until you open the hives in the Springtime and check if your January assessment agree with what you see in the hive. Beekeepers always worry about the number of frames of bees in the winter cluster two will do sometimes, three-four is great, five plus will be seen but rare and not necessary.

I did mention bees working on the crystalized stones that means they need water to dilute them. Establish a drinking trough for the bees a little away from the hives out of their flight path and in the sun. Keeping it away from the hive and out of their flight path means they won't defecate into it which could spread Nosema spore across the whole apiary. Having it in the sun keep the

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water warm which will prevent the workers from chilling. Make sure you have plenty of floaters, so the bees won't drown. Keep it full of moss and damp is good enough for the bees as they will be safe as they stand on the moss and suck up the water with their proboscis.

Observing your bees outside the hive at this time of year is great although the numbers are well down. It seems to be easier to observe the hive entrance and that occasional worker in the garden buzzing around as they collect water at the pond or collect that precious load of pollen. There are several plant shrubs in



Figure 3 Christmas Rose good for pollen

flower at this time of year. It is amazing that nature looks after all its children. So far, the Christmas box bush is now in flower, a beautiful aroma and much loved by the bees for its pollen. The first of the snowdrops are out and I also noticed the hazel is in flower, not easy to spot the female flower on the hazel, it's like a small pineapple with a red top. Of course, the male

catkins are very evident. Both flowers are on the one plant. These plants are monocious. Another plant in flower now is the Christmas rose, Helleborus, another plant loved by our bees for its pollen. Watch the entrance as the bees bring in that pollen, often small loads, but important as this is what simulates the colony. Bees never count what they have in storage, it is what is coming in the door is what matters.

In summary make your plan, keep reading, order your equipment, check for varroa, heft, feed and keep studying. Beekeeping is an ever-learning hobby. Enjoy.