

March Beekeeping

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March is a month of many weathers and a month of many jobs to do with your bees and all that needs attending before you should ever consider opening a hive. Good beekeepers are always looking forward, but it is equally important to look back and review how you think the bees got on. February has some good flying days, a chance to get out on a cleansing flight which is very important to the bees, a chance to collect that vitally important early spring pollen and to collect water to help dilute the stores. It was a very wet month, but temperatures were up in the 10-12°C for a few days allowing movement within the hives and that's where all the work is being done at this time of year. So, our assessment of the hives is if the queen is viable, if the stores are plentiful, if the population of bees are good the colony is progressing without any interference from the beekeepers and let's leave it like that.

March weather should bring plenty of cold windy weather with good drying. The



Figure 1 Magnolia about to open

hives dry out very quickly as do the stands and now is the time to apply that preservatives. Better still you may have stands already done and it a good time to get them into the apiary and replace the old ones. You should only do that on a day that the bees are active, as always avoid unnecessary disturbance. Have everything ready. Remove the hive off the old stand, watch your back, remove the old stand, and place the fresh one in

its place, level it with the aid of a spirit level. Keep the legs on a slate or block preventing it from sinking into the ground, that's why the legs rot. Then replace the stands in the same position and then the hive facing the same way. If you have the room, you can always have the new stand positioned just in front or behind the original stand and slip the hives over. Remove the old stand, it can dry out and apply the preservative ready for next year.

It's a good time of year to clip back any overhanging branches that could damage your bee veil. It's always good to let light into the apiary but during a hot summer's day shade is always welcome. Attend to any fencing or odd jobs like that, access is so important, make life easy for you, now is the time to widen that gate so you can get closer with the car or what every mode of transport you have. It's easy to carry in the empty supers but remember you'll be carrying out several full supers we hope. If not already done check the roofs for leakage and replace if needed. Temperature is very important at this time of year, so any buildup of dampness reduces their ability to maintain brood

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temperature. If your varroa are increasing you should know. All beekeepers should be checking their hives for 5 days every month of the year. If the varroa count is above the recommended number (2mites/day but that number will be rising with the season) treatment of some sort is needed. Avoid using Apiguard as it can taint the honey as the smell of Apiguard can linger for weeks or months and the temp is too low. Your options are restricted to using the strips (Bayvarol check resistance or Apivar). You will have to wait until end of March to start this treatment. You could consider doing a shook swarm but that is another procedure we will explain later.



Figure 2 Cluster of dead bees, not enough to sustain heat for survival.

Beginners are always worried about feeding their bees. You will get a lot of conflicting ideas. Basically if you look at the life cycle of the wild hive, it has a large reserve by end of September

and then top it up with ivy. That will last them until the first of the Spring flower which is the Dandelion in our area. So how do you follow nature, you feed the bees enough in September that will last them until the first flow in Springtime. The colony will build up naturally without interference from the beekeeper. Bees are not able to processing large volumes of liquid at this time. If you must feed in March continue to use fondant and as the month progresses, consider using liquid feed but not before St Patrick's Day and only if temperatures are rising.

March is a bad month for many of our beginners, as they discover that their colony did not survive. If you are in this situation firstly make sure other bees and that includes your neighbours' bees cannot get into the hive and rob it out. This is a sure way of spreading disease in the apiary and indeed in the whole area. It is best to remove the vacant hive. If bees are already robbing you should leave the floorboard and the roof there, allowing the robbers access onto the floorboard. The idea behind this is that if you remove the whole hive the robbers will return and then move to the next hive in the apiary and continue to rob. Leaving the floorboard behind gives the bees the idea that the box is now empty, and they will go home. It's always a good idea to try to determine why the colony has died out. If it's extremely light well no prizes for guessing why. The answer there is simply. Bad beekeeper who left their colony starve to death. You'll find several bees with their heads in the cells. A small cluster of bees on one or two frames with some stores looks like not enough bees to sustain heat therefore the colony perishes, too small a colony going into winter. Queen less colonies have a habit of limping on until early spring and then perish, all old bees and no new bees the numbers dwindle. Have a look at the brood combs, you will probably see some telltale signs, runt queen cells, domed

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shape capping in worker cells, scattered here and there. Even if this colony has plenty of stores it cannot survive. Also be mindful of Nosema, dysentery on the frames inside the hive or outside can be a telltale sign. If the colony still has some live bees send off a sample for examination, the bees will also be checked for Acarine. Crawling bees outside a hive, with a wet look hairless is a sign of Acarine, the famous K wing should also be looked for. Of course, always have the big diseases in the back of your mind when examining a dead or nearly dead colony. AFB, EFB very hard to detect if little or no brood in the colony, varroa and if associated viruses can spell disaster. If in any doubt, ask an expert we have many!! Regardless of the state of your bees, March is a good time to sample them and send it off for disease check. Wait until the end of the month the service is free, but you must pay for the postage. When you start to open the boxes next month you should also consider sending away a sample of comb. More about that later.

After examining each comb in the box, decide if the comb is good enough to be reused, best advice is to cut out the comb and melt down to salvage the wax or burn it, the latter is the best choice as the amount of wax you get it is not worth the effort. If you decide to keep the frame scrape the timberwork down and place into the box where you must sterilize them next month when the temperature is high enough. (Refer to our fact sheet No. 15 on our website). Temperatures are not high enough in March.



Figure 3 Bees robbing out dead colony, note all debris at entrance

Any frame with comb that is more than two seasons old should be cut out and burnt. Date all your frames when you change the wax that way there is no doubt. End of month start to wax up those frames you made up during January and February. Keep in a reasonable warm area if possible, stack them up and try to keep fresh. If you are in an area with OSR you will need supers in April. If you haven't a plan made out for the year get going, otherwise you will not know what to order, or what you need. All your requirements should be in your shed by the end of this month. Get your record cards ready, even if you have only one hive it's so important to start this practice. Organise your shed. Have everything ready it makes your beekeeping a lot more enjoyable. A smoker without fuel isn't much good so make sure you have a supply, probably last year grass cuttings. Give a final polish to your hive tool. Get a toolbox of some sort and have everything in it. Don't forget to have a scissors, queen cage and marker all ready when you need them. Other bits and pieces a lighter, magnifying glass if you need one, a torch, match box, hand wipes, your pen and hive record cards.

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If you want spare equipment keep it all separate from your working box. This avoids the necessity to clean everything whether you used it. It is a good idea to have a spare hive tool, pen lighter etc in another box all there if you need them. Do you need extra supers brood box maybe a new hive., now is the time to purchase them.

Looks like we are getting close to being ready when the time comes. Remember the colony is at a very delicate balance right now, winter bees are still in the hive there is a slight increase in new bees, the queen is a long way from full lay yet, she is only getting going, she wasn't the number of bees to incubate a large volume of eggs and the day / night temperatures can fluctuate by 15°C or more, a sunny day follow by a frosty night. For that reason no one should be opening their hives yet it's just too early regardless of the occasional pet day, it can feel warm but that cold spring breeze is always there. There is no need to look in. If you or the bees damage your queen there is no way to replace her, there are no drone now and you end up with a queenless hive. Leave the bees progress on their journey which they have repeated every year for tens of thousands of



Figure 4 Always plant for the bees,
crab apple seedlings

years without you. The numbers in the hive can be very low compared to brood as the bee: brood balance reaches a critical point. If you open the hive recovery time could be quite long, which will stress the bees, every cell every larvae count now. We hear of indicators as to when you should open your hive a good tip is not until April and if you are driving to an apiary the car can feel warm, why not open the window and place your hand on the wing mirror for four minutes If it feels cold then it's too cold to open the hive, forget about the flowering currant, it can flower in February.

Keep on working outside the hive, observe the entrances, heft and feed only if needed, check your varroa, get all the equipment ready, start thinking bee flora, start the wild garden, plant bulbs and seedlings you gathered last year. Crab apple seeds stored in the fridge until February are now popping up. It's a small tree, native, great for the bees, timber is good for machining and the crab apples for the jelly. Many new flowers are now about to open, cherry, the Magnolia is about to pop open, a very large flower but the bees work it, plenty of pollen from the Grape Hyacinth and the Viburnum Tinus. Keep going lots to do, lots to see, lots to learn, Bee Happy.