

Brighton & Lewes Beekeepers

Newsletter



Volume 4 – April 2020

Editor: Norman Dickinson

BRIGHTON AND LEWES DIVISION OF THE SUSSEX BEEKEEPERS ASSOCIATION

www.brightonlewesbeekeepers.co.uk

From your Editor

First of all I trust that you keeping safe and well during this coronavirus Covid-19 outbreak and that your bees are starting to build-up ready for the onslaught of the spring/early summer nectar.

As you will no doubt be aware our bees are considered to be livestock which means that we may travel to our apiary locations in order to attend them, but that it is essential to maintain a safe distance from others, preferably more than 2M. Full guidance from BeeBase can be found at <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/downloadNews.cfm?id=170>

As you will no doubt be fully aware, all meetings and events up to the end of June have now been cancelled due to the virus outbreak and arrangements are currently in hand to re-schedule the Bee Disease

Day which was to be held on 25th April. Once we have more news on this Pat Clowser will be sending out a communication to all members.

I also belong to a number of horticultural and other Societies and for the first time that I can remember, my monthly planner in the kitchen does not have one single entry on it. Scary. I am however still growing vegetables for Show in the hope that events from the end of August (Edenbridge and Oxted Show) onwards will still take place. It is most important that during this period of uncertainty that we try to maintain some sense of normality in our daily lives. For those that were at work, the opportunity now to do all of those jobs that you did not have the time for previously, for those in retirement it's almost a case of business as usual except it is not quite so.

As Membership Secretary of the National Honey

Show I can advise that currently, the Show is still scheduled to go ahead on 22nd, 23rd, and 24th October this year. Our last scheduled Executive Committee meeting was cancelled, not as a result of the restrictions (which were not in place at the time of the meeting) but due to the fact that an overcrowded London public transport system would be used by the Committee members and the risk of catching the virus was considered too great. An alternative meeting venue where public transport would not be required could not be found in time. We are still going ahead booking speakers, organising the Show Schedule and taking Trade bookings and I will provide updates to existing Honey Show Members and via this newsletter for B&L Members.

Keep safe and well.

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Forthcoming summer meetings:

- All currently cancelled. See rear panel

In next months edition:

- Amanda Advises
- Asian Hornet Action Team
- Contributions from our members

Hive heists: why the next threat to bees is organised crime

Mike Potts was aware he was at risk of being a victim of crime, he just didn't think it would happen to him. But Potts is an owner of an increasingly valuable commodity that thieves are targeting with growing sophistication in the US: bees.

A booming demand for honeybees for pollination drew Potts, owner of

Pottsy's Pollination in Oregon, to load 400 hives of his bees on trucks and drive them down to California's agricultural heartland last month. He unloaded them to a holding area just outside Yuba City and returned just a few days later to find 92 hives had been whisked away by thieves.

"I pulled in the yard and noticed that there was

some stuff missing," said Potts, who estimated the theft cost him \$44,000. Police subsequently pulled over three suspicious beekeepers traveling late at night, to no avail. "I've heard that there had been some stealing but didn't think it would happen to me. It's frustrating because it's getting harder and harder

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Asian Hornet Action Team Report by Manek Dubash

So so good – as of the end of March when this column was written – there have been no sightings of the Asian hornet *Vespa velutina* on the UK mainland, although the pandemic does take precedence. All that said, we need not relax vigilance: we can look in our gardens, even during a period of lock down.

While it's not my place to offer official advice, the tending of livestock – ie bees - is permitted as I understand it, so you can go out to do beekeeping and check for hornets in your traps. However, you're best advised to check the BBKA website, which has up-to-

date guidance on these matters.

Once this period is over – which I hope it will be by the time you read this – we can continue to advise and warn the public about this threat to honey bees. To that end, we have posters and identity cards (for hornets, not you!). The cards can be handed out to individuals, and the posters distributed to garden centres and the like, where people's gather outdoors.

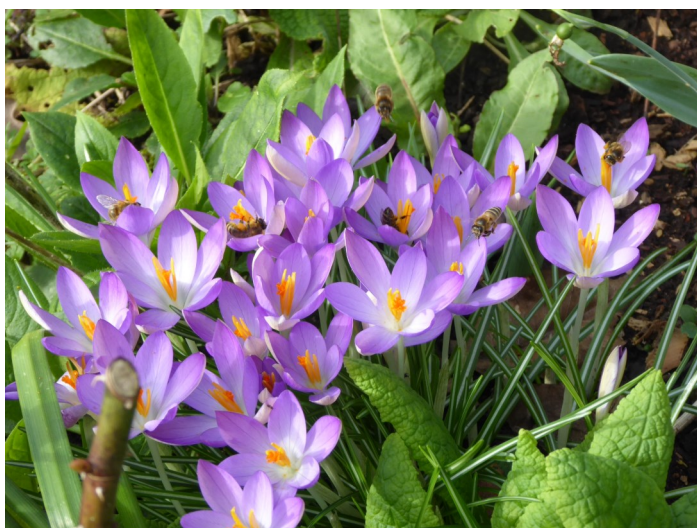
So our main task, apart from vigilance around our hives, remains to help the public both identify a suspect insect, and to obtain a specimen and photograph.

These should be sent to this email address – alertnonnative@ceh.ac.uk – or use the Asian Hornet Watch app – which, again, you should have installed on your smartphone. Please, also inform me.

We've also had a bit of press coverage in the Sussex Express and the Brighton & Hove Independent, although I'm aware, as a journalist myself, of the danger of crying 'wolf' too often, before the insects land on our shores.

Finally, I hope this finds you well and that we see the end of the pandemic soon so we can carry on enjoying our beekeeping.

Photo Corner



Top left: Bees desperate for pollen on Crocus.

Top right: Amanda surprised that the bees liked daffodils, but this colour was repeatedly visited when the photo was taken.

Right: Bees loving Laurel hedge. Tony Robinson says "Much prettier than I remember hedge in previous years"



Amanda advises...

It is very difficult to know what will happen in April this year, but it seems to be a later start than last year when I had all my colonies inspected by the end of February and a nectar flow at the end of March. This year February was a washout, March has been cold and windy and I have not been able to inspect all my colonies yet. The forecast is for improved weather in April – about time too! So as usual when we do our first few inspections we need to be prepared for almost anything but which is likely to include one or more of: adding supers for a nectar flow, swarm prevention and control, collecting swarms and taking off nucs and queen rearing. I also have some jobs for early April as soon as the weather is warmer, which I would normally do in March such as changing floors and removing any old dark comb. Because of the cold we need also to keep an eye on their stores as there has been no nectar flow yet this year. It is now mild enough to use syrup if required.

Some of my colonies are well established and have I supers of drawn comb to put back on when they need it. It is important to remove frames full of sealed mixed winter stores if sugar syrup was given in the autumn so as to reduce the risk of contaminating this year's honey. Drawn comb is best used early in the season when it may not be warm enough for enthusiastic comb building and also very important for preventing swarm preparations as they don't recognize foundation as useable space, but rather as a barrier and can actually lead to congestion in some conditions. Remember to remove the queen excluder if there is a box of foundation above, until they have started working on it, or put one drawn frame in the middle or try spraying the foundation with syrup. I will try to keep a few frames of drawn comb to replace frames of sealed brood removed when I take off nucs in order to prevent swarm preparations. By running all mine on the same sized shallow frames, I can easily use drawn honey frames to give the brood nest more space. When the brood nest is full of sealed

brood and there is little space for queen to lay in, when the sealed brood emerges the nest becomes very crowded and this can trigger production of queen cells for swarming. The Scientific Beekeeping website explains the rationale behind reducing the area of sealed brood in his 'Understanding colony buildup and decline part 7b', and I thoroughly recommend you read that. My colonies which were nucs last year of course have no drawn supers of their own yet and will have to make do with foundation, as I generally do not put supers from other colonies on them, although if I have spare ones, such as this year from two colonies which I culled because of drone laying workers, having no disease, a week in a bag with a lid of acetic acid on top should reduce any viruses and after ventilation they can have those.

If swarm cells are seen, this year I shall try the Demaree method as suggested on The Apiarist blog <https://www.theapiarist.org/demaree-swarm-control/> He also has a good guide to setting up a bait hive to catch any of yours or your neighbouring colony's swarms which get away <https://www.theapiarist.org/bait-hive-guide/> however, with all the spare time we may have this summer confined at home those lucky enough to have space in their gardens for their colonies, should have plenty of time to prevent them swarming. It may be more difficult to get to out apiaries if we get travel restrictions but I think in most countries allowances have been made for people tending their livestock.

Viruses are a hot topic at the moment, and it is worth familiarizing yourselves with bee viruses. Some of you may unfortunately have lost colonies this winter. It is worth having a good long look to work out why. Many will have been lost because of the erratic weather conditions last year resulting in unreliable queen mating and drone laying queens or workers by spring, as I have already experienced. At the Divisional apiary one colony I knew had declined in size over the autumn and winter, more than the others. In mid March I noticed

dysentery around the entrance although they were still alive then, a week later I went to cull them but found they



had already died. While there are several diseases and problems which can cause dysentery (see the Disease symptoms chart on the B&L website information page) in this case it is likely that virus was involved and there were lots of dead on the floor. A healthy colony should have been able to keep its floor clear so be suspicious if there are any dead there. One of my colonies had about 30 dead on the floor when I checked mid March, but they were bald and shiny, classic Chronic Bee Paralysis symptoms. To reduce the incidence, be hygienic with equipment and gloves, try to get them onto clean comb as viruses can be passed via body fluids (faeces), avoid overcrowding of colony and apiary, avoid any stresses, which can lower the immune system (prolonged wet weather in Feb?). Also it would not be a good idea to use them for queen rearing, in case they are a susceptible strain.

Is it just me or are there not many dandelions around? I have a few in flower in my garden, but normally the verges round me are yellow with them. Some verges have been mown to within half an inch of their life though, gloom. Dandelion flowers seem to be very popular with the solitary bees in my garden, I saw two unidentified species on the same flower the other day. I saw my first female Hairy Footed Flower Bee on Pulmonaria on 21st March and the next day saw Red Masons, and beautiful Tawny Mining bees looking for nest sites. I grew single, mixed Anemone Blanda in tubs this year for the first time and the flowers seem to be a magnet for honey bees. This time of year is surely the most lovely to spend in the garden in our new found leisure. Keep safe!

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to keep bees alive. And then you transport them down and they just get taken.”

The theft is the latest in a string of beehive heists, often undertaken at the dead of night using forklifts and trucks. Hives are regularly split open or dismantled, interventions that can kill tens of thousands of the kidnapped bees. The problem has become severe enough in California that certain police officers now specialize in hive crime.

“Hive theft has always been an issue but it has definitely increased over the last eight years,” said Rowdy Freeman, a Butte county police officer who is commonly referred to as “bee theft detective”. Freeman has compiled figures showing there was an explosion in California hive thefts in 2016, with 1,695 being taken, compared with 101 in 2015. In 2017, the figure was 1,048 hives.

“The number fluctuates but it is definitely something that will continue and that will require resources and advancements in the use of technology to help prevent and deter theft.”

The center of beehive thefts is California’s Central Valley, a fertile stretch of agricultural land responsible for about a quarter of all the produce grown in the US. This huge output – of lettuce, grapes, lemons, apricots and more – requires pollination from far more bees that naturally live in the area. The main driver of the demand for honeybees is the almond industry, which has doubled in size over the past two decades. There are currently 1.17m acres of almonds in California that require pollination which, at a standard rate of two beehives an acre, means the industry somehow needs to conjure up 2.34m beehives for a short window of time each February, when almond trees start to blossom. Beekeepers from across the US congregate in the Central Valley in a sort of annual almond jamboree; more than two-thirds of the nation’s commercially managed honeybees sent on trucks to a 50-mile-wide strip of fertile land. Unlike native, wild bees like bumblebees, honeybees are carefully marshaled in hives and are now more valuable as contract pollination workers than as honey producers.

But the almond industry’s growth is heightening the demand for more bees at a time when even maintaining current numbers is a struggle. Due to the ravages of deadly mites, diseases and toxic pesticides, beekeepers now typically lose 40% of their colonies each winter, only making these numbers up through splitting hives and using various treatments and supplements to boost reproduction rates.

This dynamic – growing demand for pollinators at a time when supply is under pressure – has seen the typical cost of a hive for pollination shoot up, from just \$35 a few years ago to \$200, and upwards, now. Pollination has become big business, causing some desperate beekeepers, or organized gangs, to be drawn to beehive crime.

“Normal people can’t just go steal 500 hives with a forklift and a truck,” said Charley Nye, a beekeeper researcher at University of California, Davis. “So it’s a pretty small pool of people that are able to steal them. But the reward is so big that I think it can be tempting to people to do that.”

Lloyd Cunniff, who has been involved in beekeeping since he was 13 years old, never intended to bring his bees to the Central Valley, where endless rows of almond trees stretch out across the landscape in almost every direction.

But Cunniff, now 59, had seen his third-generation apiary in Montana decimated by colony collapse disorder – a mysterious syndrome where the worker bees vacate a hive en masse – and needed the income. In January 2017, he loaded 488 beehives, each handmade in distinctive pine and cedar, and headed west.

Through a trusted intermediary, Cunniff set his hives down to rest in a remote area near a levee. As is typical in the beekeeping world, there were no fences or other security systems to protect them. The next day, amid heavy fog, Cunniff went back to find them. “We had a GPS reading and we drove out there and my hired man said: ‘There’s your turn.’ And I turned in there and I said: ‘This can’t be the right turn.’ And he said: ‘Why?’ I said: ‘Because

there’s no bees sitting,’” Cunniff recalled. “And I thought, ‘Uh-oh.’”

All 488 boxes had gone, quickly and skillfully loaded on to a truck and spirited away, costing Cunniff not just the \$100,000 in pollination fees but also the basis of his livelihood. He wasn’t to know, but he was just one of many victims of a well-orchestrated operation.

Not long after the theft, police were called to a scruffy field near Fresno where they saw something akin to bee carnage. Beehives were scattered randomly across the land, some open with their innards torn out, others scratched and daubed in paint. An irate swarm of bees made officers wary of exiting their cars.

It was like a chop shop for bees ... And there were a lot of aggressive bees. “It was like a chop shop for bees,” said Andres Solis, a Fresno detective who specializes in agricultural crime. “None of the boxes matched, it was really untidy. And there were a lot of aggressive bees.”

Police called in beekeepers who estimated there were 2,500 hives belonging to a variety of legal owners. A nearby man, Pavel Tveretinov, was arrested under suspicion that he was hacking up the hives in order to multiply them and sell them on to needy growers.

An alleged accomplice, Vitaliy Yeroshenko, was also arrested and both now face trial. “Victims started coming out of the woodwork after we started putting it out there,” Solis said. “We looked at what we saw and thought none of these beehives belonged to these gentlemen.”

The overall number of thefts dropped following the arrests but beekeepers are concerned that the ballooning demand for honeybees is only going to spur further criminal enterprises. The fallout from the ecological crisis in the bee, and wider insect, world is likely to include more and more bee rustlers.

“There’s a shortage of bees this year, again,” Cunniff said. “You watch in this next week or two, there’s going to be stealing of bees like crazy down here. ‘It was just my turn. That’s how I look at it because it happens to somebody every year down here. They’re stealing them all the time. It’s just going to keep getting bigger and bigger.’”

Thanks to Tony Robinson for this.

B&L Divisional Diary 2020

Indoor meetings:

Meetings are held on the 3rd Wednesday of the month, October to March at Cliffe church hall, Lewes, unless otherwise stated. Members are invited at 7.00pm to assist with setting out chairs etc. ready for a 7.15pm start. Non-members are always welcome.

Winter programme:

~~15th January 2020: Spring Preparation with Christine Stevens.~~

~~19th February: AGM + Honey & Mead Show + Mini-Auction.~~

~~18th March: Swarming – Prevention and Control with Amanda Millar.~~

Summer programme:

All currently cancelled until further notice.

Dates for your diary:

~~7th March: Sussex BKA AGM, Luxford Centre.~~

~~3rd, 4th & 5th April: SBKA Spring Convention.~~

~~25th April 2020: Bee Disease Day, Ringmer.~~

~~16th May: Sussex BKA Bee Market, Heathfield.~~

~~11th, 12th & 13th June: South of England Show.~~

The above events have now been cancelled due to the Coronavirus outbreak.

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National Honey Show Representative:
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The Brighton and Lewes Division of the SBKA cannot accept any responsibility for loss, injury or damage sustained by persons in consequence of their participation in activities arranged.

Contributions to your newsletter

Contributions for the newsletter, including photos can be sent, preferably by email, to the editor. Please refer to panel above for details. Please limit to a maximum of 900 words. Copy to be sent no later than the 12th of the month preceding the month of publication. Photos etc. for the website should be emailed to our Gerald Legg

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