

March in the Apiary

By Ian McLean NDB, ARPS

March is a critical month in colony development. Ian McLean discusses why this is.

In the Hive

February pollen produces April foragers

The early pollen stimulates the queen into lay. This means more mouths to feed and stores can be used up fast, yet there is little nectar income. If your colonies are short of stores, they can starve or the queen may have to stop laying, and this will mean fewer 'foragers for the flow' and less honey.

Look at the reproductive timings. From egg to imago takes three weeks, and from imago to forager three weeks, so eggs laid in late February and through March will become foragers from early April. They will be few at first and replace the old bees dying, but they build up and by the end of April and into May they are ready for the spring flow. So keeping the colony in full lay now is vital.

In the Apiary

The relevance of advice

As I write, the weather is cycling warm and then wintry as the Jet Stream waves across the Atlantic. Spring in the south of England is on average four weeks ahead of Scotland, and where I live, near Martin Mere, Lancashire's market garden area, my early flows are not replicated forty miles away in the Pennines. So with a national readership some have to read March notes for April conditions. Ron Brown highlighted this in his book *Beekeeping - A Seasonal Guide*, p28, so do have a look. Things tend to level up as we move into summer, but again with our island weather, beekeepers will experience different conditions on the same day.

Bees need water

Bees will be using stores which means they need water to dilute the honey. I have used a plastic tray with wood chip or potting compost in it. Choose a sunny spot, not in the flight path, (to avoid the spread of nosema). Bees do not drink at the water's edge but suck from damp areas.

Patience

Do not be in a hurry to open hives. Remember bees lived for millions of years before man invented apiaries. Wait for flowering currant to be in bloom, and then pick a warm day for a quick peek. I have more patience than I used to have and often better gauge activity by watching the forager activity at the entrance. Read *At the Hive Entrance* by H Storch' if you want to explore this idea.

Feeding

I have suggested 'hefting' (lifting the back of the hive to judge weight), but at an early inspection you can develop this by lifting the frames either side of the cluster and seeing what the stores actually are.

If bees do need feeding, you may have a spare brood comb of stores; you can slip that alongside the cluster. If you do not have spare stores then, hopefully, it will be warm enough to give them thick syrup (1kg sugar to 650ml warm water). Use a rapid feeder in direct contact with the cluster. Read Clive de Bruyn's book *Practical Beekeeping*, p170-176 for more detail. Some say feed dilute syrup in spring; my argument is that if the bees have stores they need water, if they need food, the most efficient supply is thick syrup.

Supplementary feeds

I have never found it necessary to feed pollen supplement or substitute, but I live on the edge of a village with gardens to one side, and parkland and mixed woodland on the other. If you live in an agricultural desert, you may need to.

Is the queen in lay?

If the colony is flying well and bringing in loads of pollen, then all will be well inside. If in doubt, on a warm day, open the hive quietly and remove an outside comb from the brood box. Now part the combs in the centre of the activity, lift a comb and check the brood. No brood or drone brood instead of worker brood would indicate a failing queen.

Your options are limited if you have that problem. If possible, remove the queen, if she is present and unite to a strong colony. The frames will be spoiled by the drone cells and will need to be removed and recycled as soon as possible. My advice is not to waste time trying to rectify a lost cause but concentrate on the good colonies and you will get increase soon enough.

Speed up inspections in spring

Your inspections should aim to create the least disturbance. You will recall that I use off-centre entrances; the bees need to be near that entrance to defend the hive. I move the brood nest, as a block, over to the entrance side of the hive, so that in order to expand, the queen must lay in the combs remote from the entrance. If there is brood on seven combs I record that on my record card. Next time I open the hive I look to see if the colony has expanded to the eighth or ninth comb. If it has, then all is well, if not the colony has problems. Thus I can check by looking at a couple of combs and disturbing the colony as little as possible.

Check for disease

If your colony does not develop, the most common problem is nosema. Hopefully, your association will run a 'Nosema Bash' when you can take thirty bee samples from each of your hives to be checked for nosema and acarine.

If you fed late in autumn, the bees may not have been able to get the moisture content of the stores down, fermentation may follow, which causes dysentery. Faecal spots would indicate this. Dysentery is not nosema but if there are any infected bees defecating nosema spores then nosema can build up rapidly. There is no licensed treatment for nosema; if the colony fails to build up, re-queen, preferably by adding a nucleus of healthy bees.

Information

I can recommend BeeBase, the NBU, Animal Plant & Health Agency website www.nationalbeeunit.com/ and <http://website.lineone.net/~dave.cushman/>

Do not forget the Bee Trade Exhibition, held at Stoneleigh on Saturday 7 March 2015 and the BBKA Spring Convention at Harper Adams from 17-19 April 2015.

The best of luck to those taking any BBKA Modules on 21 March.



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