

March in the Apiary

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With the approach of spring, March is the month when the active beekeeping season begins, albeit at a fairly gentle pace to start with. In previous columns the importance of food stores has been discussed. This remains vital as the brood nest will be continuing to grow.

In addition to ensuring that the colony has sufficient stores to survive through a month which can have very variable weather year-on-year March is a time when stimulative feeding can be considered. Before oilseed rape was such a predominant spring flowering crop in some agricultural areas beekeepers were largely content to allow the colonies to develop naturally and peak for the summer forage, which was the main honey harvest. Now, in areas of oilseed rape, the colony will need to be stimulated to take full advantage of this crop.

One of the topics routinely covered in most of the beginners' courses is the natural history of the honey bee. Planning for a particular crop is one of the many reasons that this understanding is essential. Once a fertilised egg is laid by the queen it will take three days to hatch into a worker bee larva. This larva will feed and grow for a further six days. The cell is then capped and the larva pupates, undergoing complete metamorphosis and emerging as an adult bee twelve days later. That adds up to twenty-one days from egg to adult.

The young bee will spend about three weeks inside the hive before it becomes a forager for the final few weeks of its life. It follows therefore that in order to have an effective foraging force of workers the queen must be laying eggs in sufficient numbers six weeks before the crop is expected to come into flower. If the oilseed rape begins to yield in mid to late April then the colony will need to be stimulated from about the beginning of March. Of course the timings will vary depending on your geographical location.

Feeding to stimulate a colony is done by giving sugar syrup to the bees. This is intended to mimic a nectar flow. A solution of one pint of water to one pound of sugar, often referred to as a weak or light syrup, is given and once the temperature reaches about 10°C during the day then bees can be fed the syrup using a contact feeder. Once feeding starts it must be continued until there is natural forage available to the bees as the colony has expanded and it must not then be left to starve if the weather turns colder and bees are confined to the hive.

Take care not to spill any syrup in the apiary. This is especially important when inverting a contact feeder as syrup will flow from the feeder until a vacuum has been formed above the syrup. Invert the feeder over a suitable receptacle to collect any syrup before placing on the hive.

Pollen is the other essential element in the diet of the bee. Pollen provides, among other things, the protein content of the diet required for brood rearing. Hopefully, your bee hives are close to plentiful pollen sources as this should be a consideration in siting an apiary. However, pollen substitutes or supplements can be fed

March jobs

- ❑ Check stores and feed if necessary.
- ❑ Consider stimulation feeding with syrup and pollen if needed.
- ❑ Change floors.
- ❑ Remove woodpecker and mouse guards.
- ❑ Start your new season's records.

to the bees in spring if pollen is in short supply. Recipes are available for these pollen patties, but sourcing the ingredients can prove slightly trickier. Fortunately, for those of us not into the DIY of pollen patties there are suitable products widely available through the beekeeping suppliers.

March is usually too early to inspect the bees as the temperatures are too low. In addition it is always good practice to have a reason for doing an inspection and a course of action available should there be any problem. However, having discussed stimulating the colony for an early crop, one good reason for a quick inspection would be to check that the queen has not become a drone layer during the winter, as stimulating such a colony to collect a harvest is futile. Another reason would be to check that the bees have sufficient stores. Even if you have no intention of stimulating the colony then they still need to be fed if stores are low.

If the daytime temperature reaches about 14°C then it is warm enough for a quick inspection. Full protective clothing should be worn and, working quickly, the colony can be assessed to ensure that the queen is laying and that there is a normal worker pattern to the brood, and to determine the remaining stores in the hive.

March is a good time to change the floor of the hive for a clean one. This was always done when bees were traditionally overwintered on solid floors, but even if bees have been overwintered on open mesh floors an early spring clean does no harm and means that any varroa monitoring will be effective as the floor is not littered with dead bees and other hive debris. The hive can be moved to one side, a new floor placed on the original site and the hive lifted back onto the new floor once the old floor has been freed from the brood box.

Jobs that can be undertaken quickly and are not so temperature dependant are the removal of the protection which had been put in place against woodpecker attack and the removal of mouse guards. The inserts can be placed under the open mesh floors for varroa monitoring (once the floors have been changed or cleaned).

Do not forget to start your records for the new season and should you consider stimulative feeding, bear in mind that swarming may occur earlier than if the bees are left to build up naturally. ✚