

Patterson's Page

Roger Patterson argues that for successful beekeeping, observation and a good knowledge of the basics are paramount.

I recently gave a short talk and demonstration at a local BKA where I mentioned, as I often do, that two of the most important things in beekeeping are to understand the 'basics' and observe what is happening in the colony. The 'reading' of a colony is something that will be learnt with experience, you cannot be taught it and you cannot learn it from a book or a PC screen. The key, as with brood disease, is to know what is normal. If there looks to be a problem, there usually is. The more observant beekeeper will immediately spot a problem, but you still need to know what it is likely to be so that you can remedy it. That is where the teaching comes in.

At a demonstration, how often do you hear "Where's the queen"? or "Is she marked"? as the likely first questions, as if they are the most important things. Of course the queen is important, but there is a lot to see when inspecting a colony and I am sure many beekeepers miss a lot of signs. I think the 'basics' are very important and these include the life cycles, the swarming process and disease recognition. These can be learnt outside the apiary and will give you the knowledge to understand what you may observe that is different in a colony. You will be confronted with a possible problem instantly, and the thinking will need to be done 'on the hoof' so there will be no consulting a book or searching online with a hive open.

In my view, observation should start when you are some distance away from the hives. Have a look at the activity at the entrance. Compare the colonies; How are they flying? Is one not flying well? Are the bees not as active as you would expect? Make a mental note and you can often see the answer inside.

Returning to the original point, with an illustrative example. There were two colonies in the apiary of a beginner, one Warré hive and one National that she was given. There were problems with both colonies and it needed a reasonable amount of knowledge to understand what had happened. A glance at the entrance of both told me that something was not right. On a warm sunny day there was little flying activity and the bees were just walking about the entrance. We opened the Warré first which was only on one box. We gave it a full inspection and found four queen cells, all sealed. The queen had been laying quite well, but the colony was quite small, not totally filling the box and there were few drones. There were some eggs, though not many and we could not find the queen. The bees in the National were only on about five frames (some of which were shallows) and quite weak. There was no brood at all, but two recently emerged queen cells and no emergency cells but we saw a virgin queen.

As a beekeeper, whatever your experience, you need to work out what has happened in cases like these and then decide how to

deal with them. In the Warré hive, four queen cells is a bit of an odd number, too many for supersedure and too few for swarming, so it could have been either. Having seen similar situations over the last few years, my feeling was they were supersedure, but it was considered they had swarmed a day or so earlier. This has become quite common in the last few years. In the National hive, I think the queen had started to fail, so supersedure cells were built, then the queen had stopped laying and 'disappeared' when it was too late for emergency cells to be built, leaving the supersedure cells to emerge. Both of these situations are difficult to understand unless you know the 'basics'.



Take a good look at the hives in your apiary and observe the bees' behaviour each time you visit them. Photo by David Wootton.

We are coming up to the time when local BKAs are preparing their beginners courses. I have no wish to influence those who run courses, but I would like to see observation given more importance than it currently is. Although it is difficult to teach how to read a colony, I think there is a case for encouraging the beginner to observe bees more closely. When inspecting a colony, you learn that there is a little more to it than just looking for 'Hooper's Five'.

In a week or so in May I had several emails from people wanting to have a colony of bees to 'help them out' in their garden. When I pointed out they need care and suggested they come along to see inside a beehive, the interest stopped. I got the impression something triggered off this activity, but do not know what. As beekeepers I think we all need to deal with these requests and a little explanation is likely to do more good than a dismissive reply. I think we need to tell these people that obtaining bees, then abandoning them is likely to do far more harm than good. Once again they need knowledge and understanding. There is a greater awareness and concern about bees, but we need to deal with it in a responsible way. I have given talks to non-beekeepers for a long time and the level of knowledge is far greater than it was ten years ago. I gave a talk to a local parish meeting on the day the EU voted on neonicotinoids and I was asked several questions on that. Even though it had not reached the newspapers yet, the audience was telling me what had happened!

I have been doing a lot of work on Dave Cushman's beekeeping website www.dave-cushman.net including mending broken links, updating and adding material. Can I ask all beekeepers to check there is a link from their own BKA website and if not to arrange it please? I am happy to do a reciprocal link too. It is reckoned to be one of the world's most comprehensive beekeeping websites and a useful resource for all. Perhaps those who run beekeeping courses can add it to their list of information sources, as there is now a lot of material for beginners.

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