



Things to do and see

Author Andy Willis - March 2009

This year March will be make or break time for our colonies. The winter has been both cold and wet with days suitable for cleansing flights very limited, until the last two weeks of February.

Most of my bees have eaten far more of their stores than normal. Some heavier hives on inspection have shown signs of the winter cluster becoming isolated from their stores (dead bees on one side of the hive), one of which has died completely having starved. Other hives are showing serious shortages of bees already. These, if they survive will probably take most of the season to recover and not make much honey. These undersized colonies are better united together using a sheet of newspaper between stocks. Only do this if they are healthy. So a check of their brood will be necessary. This is best left until a mild spell later in the month or you may have to wait until April; when the weather might be better.

Other stocks are showing great promise with brood boxes more than half full of bees with good numbers of bees occupying the first super and up to 4 frames full of brood.

A stimulative feed made using 1lb sugar to 1 pint water adding no more than 4 pints of syrup at a time may help these weaker colonies. Stronger colonies that are running short of food are also requiring feeding. Don't overdo the feeding of strong colonies or you may cause them to swarm early.

Shook swarms can be done to the strongest colonies towards the end of the month but most will benefit from being left to build up.

Most hives will benefit from a spring clean if you are not going to do a shook swarm (which replaces all the brood frames and box as well) If you still have solid floors, these will need swapping with a clean one. The old floor is then scraped clean of debris and scorched with a blow torch.

On a good warm day when the bees are flying well, a full spring inspection can take place. The aim of the inspection is to ascertain the colony is queen right, that there is no disease present, that there is a good brood pattern and that the queen hasn't become a drone layer. Don't forget to check on stores, more hives starve in March than in any other month of the year.

Some good weather in March can make a huge difference to our bees. It only takes a few days of warm weather for the spring flowers to come out. Willow normally reaches a peak of flowering this month. Bees foraging willow return to the hive coated in yellow pollen all over, as well as having heavy large yellow pollen loads on their legs.

Some times the bees in a small colony are found to have clustered to one side of a brood box. This small cluster is reluctant to move in cold weather, even to feed from a contact feeder over the feed hole only a few inches away. To overcome this I sometimes centralise the cluster of bees by removing some frames on the far side and using the hive tool to lever the whole cluster on the remaining frames across the runners into the gap. The removed frames are then replaced on the opposite side, with minimal disturbance to the cluster of bees. The bees now being directly below the feed hole in the crown board can have direct access to syrup in a contact bucket feeder placed above, without having to leave the cluster or brood.

In a mild spell towards the end of the month, unmarked queens from last year can be found and marked with last years colour (Red) this is much easier then later on when there are more bees. Also the queen will be extra large being well fed for egg laying. If the weather is not right for a spring inspection this month don't worry, wait until next month.

Monitor for varroa and make your plans for your chosen method of varroa control during the season. Open mesh floors certainly make monitoring natural mite drops fairly easy. In my experience having an open mesh floor over the winter has not had any detrimental effect on the colonies, indeed the hives appear dryer than ones with solid floors.

Varroa count for March in line with the CSL Guidelines

Level and Control required	Average Mite drop per day	Proportion of infested drone Pupae
Low No Action	2 or less	
Medium Plan Action	Between 2 and 9	
High Take Action	More than 9	

If you should find any drone brood towards the end of the month then don't be afraid to uncap and check for Varroa.

Plants in flower this month visited by our bees include:

- Crocus
- Willow (bees dusted yellow all over)
- Winter flowering shrubby honeysuckle
- Hyacinths
- Evergreen clematis 'Armandii'
- Rosemary
- Winter/Spring Heather
- Japanese Quince 'Japonica'
- Hellebores
- Mimosa
- Cherry Plum and Blackthorn
- Flowering Currant
- Almonds and Apricots
- Berberis Darwinii
- Early Cherries and plums
- Gooseberries and red and white currants (end of Month)
- Early dandelions (Orange Pollen)

Towards the end of the month put out masonry bee boxes.

Check drawn super combs, any that are dark, misshapen, mouldy, choked with old hard pollen or mouse damaged are best rendered down to recover the wax. (See wax purification 'the Andy method') The recovered wax can then be exchanged for foundation at some local suppliers, or taken to Stoneleigh (the BBKA spring convention) in April, where you will have a choice of suppliers to exchange for more foundation, at minimal cost.

Remove any winter hive protection, e.g. mouse guards and chicken wire for woodpecker protection. This will allow easier access for the bees bringing in that vital early spring pollen.