

Spring is nearly here...

March so far has been a few nice days followed by some cold frosty days and nights. The weather can do anything here in March. The bees are out flying in force on the sunny dry days, collecting in pollen which is always a good sign.



Stored food supplies will be low and there are a limited number of flowers providing nectar and, in particular, the pollen required for the new brood the queen is now producing. Now they are a bit more active, they will be using a lot of stores now. My colonies are going through food like no tomorrow so keep an eye on your colonies, we are not out of the winter woods just yet. We have had reports from a few members about their colonies suffering from starvation.

It is still too early to have a proper peak in and fully inspect, so please don't be tempted. A lot can be learned about the condition of your bees just by standing and watching the activity at the front door.

Are the bees active on the fine days?

Are they collecting pollen?

Are all your colonies active or some more than others?

Is there enough food for the bees?

Is there enough food for the larvae?

As I said, it is unwise to open up hives to properly inspect at the moment, as any brood could be chilled. However, if any of your colonies is acting differently to the others i.e few or no bees flying when other colonies are busy then a quick lift of the crown board may be necessary. This should only be done at the warmest part of the day, 10 degrees.

Where are the bees? Try to see where the cluster is in relation to food. If the cluster is separated from any stores they could starve. The solution to this one is quite easy. Rearrange frames with honey nearer the cluster or provide fondant above the cluster. For the larvae, provide pollen substitute around the cluster. You'll be surprised how quickly the bees go on to this. Even a quick spray of thin syrup over the bees may save them from starvation.



Some may advocate taking mouseguards off in March but I am a bit more wary. A few years ago I took them off in March for a floor change and a few weeks later I found two dead mice in the hive. I have watched my hives a lot with mouseguards on and they don't seem to impede the bees bringing pollen in, so I leave mine on until the weather has warmed up a bit.



I have already been routinely clearing my entrances of dead bees so the other bees can get out and fly, but by the end of this month I like to make sure I have changed all floors for clean ones. This way any dead bees are removed, preventing pathogens from dead bees causing disease and in the process, clearing the entrance to the hive. Changing floors can be done on any day, it doesn't require a specific temperature, if you can lift a hive intact from the old floor to the new one, as it doesn't involve

opening the hive. Although, I would suggest you take the roof off on larger colonies, as multiple boxes can be very heavy. A beekeeping assistant is useful for this task.

So, whilst we wait for the warmer weather and I have mentioned it before, but now is the time to think about the season ahead.

What IPM (integrated pest management) system you will employ to combat varroa? You can find the 'Managing Varroa' leaflet on our website or the National Bee Unit website

Do you want to increase or decrease your stock?

Where are you going to put any extra colonies?

What swarm prevention techniques are you going to use?

Have you got space and equipment to deal with swarms?

How many queens do you want to raise and how?

Which queens are you going to replace?

Which queens do you want to breed from?

Raising our own queens is something we should all be trying. Not only does it mean raising locally bred queens better suited for our conditions but in the long term selecting our best queens from our own colonies will increase the quality of your stock...oh and it is cheaper!

When you read about grafting and insemination it seems really daunting and maybe that is the reason why hobbyist beekeepers are put off. But there are a few simpler methods, such as the miller method which I use, out there which don't cost a lot in equipment and are ideal for raising a few queens for yourself. We have a talk planned in April about queen rearing. The club is also trying to put something together for this season to help members so let's give it a go, its more fun than just passing your credit card details to a supplier!



These are only a few things we can be asking ourselves. As we all know, the bees read different books to us and will do their own thing but at least with some sort of plan you can hopefully avoid crisis point. As with most questions asked in beekeeping there will always be a multitude of answers, opinions and ways of doing things but these are just my thoughts 😊