Wisborough Green Beekeepers Association

Guidance notes for new beekeepers

These guidance notes are intended to help those who have recently passed through the WGBKA Preliminary sessions, whether they have bees or not.

Teaching and Learning

Our approach is to help and encourage members to be good all-round beekeepers, which includes both practical and theoretical elements. All responsible beekeepers need to handle bees, so to manage them efficiently, they need to understand how a colony works and how it develops throughout the year. To avoid confusion we only teach one way, with great emphasis placed on the "basics", which are factual things that you need to know.

Our practical teaching is done at the teaching apiary, in small groups under supervision. We don't have a mentoring or buddy system, as we found it a poor use of time. Someone will willingly help and possibly pay a visit if needed.

Care should be taken when reading or watching videos about beekeeping theory and management techniques, as there is quite a lot of material that is either unreliable or inappropriate for our conditions in West Sussex. This could be because of the inexperience of the writer/presenter, or that something that may be done successfully in Sweden or California may not suit our climate or the kind of bees that survive well here. There is quite a lot of misinformation and "false logic", which might sound plausible, but how does a beginner know that, until they have enough knowledge and experience to sort the wheat from the chaff? Just because there are masses of photos in a book or a video is a slick presentation, doesn't mean it's good quality information. To help you there are some sound resources suggested later.

I hope you haven't felt under pressure to start beekeeping, because at WGBKA we don't operate that way. Elsewhere, there is a constant trail of ex-beekeepers who were only told the positive and "fluffy" side of the craft, not what can go wrong or the time involved in caring for bees. We tend to get members up to speed quickly so they are competent at handling bees on their own, giving both positives and negatives, so they can spot possible problems and know how to deal with them.

Bees

There are around 28 sub-species worldwide that evolved in isolation to suit the different conditions. We have our own native bee *Apis mellifera mellifera (Amm)*, which has survived for 10,000 years since the end of the last Ice Age. The bees in all bar the harsher climates have become heavily mongrelised due to the continued importation of bees and queens. Those that do best have characteristics similar to *Amm* and are termed "locally adapted". The importation of bees and queens is widely discouraged by many beekeepers, some of the reasons can be found here BIBBA Opposes the Importation of Honey Bees and Queens - BIBBA. Don't be fooled by what are called

“Buckfast” bees. If you read promotional material, you may think they were bred by a monk, but that is extremely unlikely. There is no genetic definition of Buckfast. They are very variable, being various crosses of exotic races, which is shown by the great colour variations in bees on “Buckfast” breeders/sellers websites. It is well-known that subsequent generations can be quite aggressive, which is one of the reasons why many users replace their queens regularly. Be aware of “locally bred” queens that may be offered commercially. They are often propagated from imported stock.

Producing second and subsequent colonies and queens is easy. Once you have bees or know others who have, there is no need to buy bees or queens, as you can increase from what you already have and we will show you how to do it. We raise several queens each year from our best stocks that we distribute to members.

Starting

We have what is called a **“Beginners Pack”** that many of our members started with. Have a chat with them to find their experiences. There are some simple rules, but only to avoid misunderstanding. Application is made by the potential beekeeper, then when we have established the member has become competent and knowledgeable enough to manage and care for bees and has somewhere to keep them, they are allocated a pack.

Please be patient as we need to raise queens, which is dependant on the season. In the early days of the scheme, we allocated packs to people who weren’t fully committed. They quickly gave up, which wasted bees and hives that others could have had. We expect recipients to attend meetings and get to a reasonable level, then we will encourage and help them all they need. It is much better to start beekeeping in a controlled manner than to buy a load of equipment and bees that may be inappropriate, or soon get abandoned.

Recipients make up a 5 frame nucleus (small colony) from the teaching apiary bees and place it in a WGBKA hive. It stays at the apiary for the rest of the summer, where the recipient handles it under supervision. There are three options, bees only and two options with different hive (national) contents. When they decide they want to keep their colony they assemble their hive under supervision and transfer their colony into it. We encourage new beekeepers to use this route, rather than buy bees commercially, that are likely to be headed by imported queens. They also learn a lot more.

If you don’t wish to take advantage of the Beginners Pack, please speak to someone before buying anything, so we can advise on the best options and equipment sources.

Equipment

You don’t need very much, although you may be encouraged to buy a lot of junk you may only use occasionally, if at all. The Beginners Pack provides a hive, bees, hive strap, feeder and a queen excluder. You will need a smoker and hive tool as probably the only other essential items. They are tools in the same way as cooking utensils are. They are used all the time when inspecting a colony,

so you need to be comfortable using them. Some smokers are poorly made from thin material. At WGBKA we have had Dadant smokers for about 15 years and they are still in good condition, but we bought some cheap copies at half the price that burnt out in 2-3 years. Check that it is comfortable in your hand and the spring isn't so weak the bellows don't recover quickly, or so strong it makes your fingers ache. The hive tool is used to prise boxes apart that will be stuck together with propolis by the bees. One with a thin end is much easier to use than a blunt-ended one. Queen cages are always useful, with the "puzzle" type being cheap and easy to use.

Unless it is a well-known source, I don't suggest buying anything online. There is a lot of equipment available that is poor quality, often with the sizes wrong. The major suppliers have sales several times a year, so wait until then.

The beginners pack will provide your first hive. For subsequent hives the "seconds" are very good value, being about half "premium" price. They are made from western red cedar that has been grown in sustainable UK forests, so with a low carbon footprint. They are only seconds because there will be a few live knots.

We don't lend equipment, other than extracting equipment. We have had quite a lot borrowed but not returned. There is also the concern of possibly transferring disease.

We have a large amount of protective clothing, mainly tunics, not full beesuits. This is intended for use by those who don't have their own bees or have only just started. We expect members to acquire their own when they have their own bees.

We have a "shop", where we stock a small range of essential items, such as frames, foundation, frame nails, etc. Details are on the website.

Extracting Equipment

We have honey extracting equipment to loan to members. This avoids members buying equipment they only use occasionally. Details are usually in the newsletter.

How we teach

Since WGBKA was formed in 1947 our teaching has evolved and will continue to do so. We encourage members to learn from their bees as well as from other sound resources. The teaching apiary is important, but is backed up by winter meetings and events like "Bee Health Days" that are run in conjunction with the Bee Inspectors. They bring samples of notifiable diseases (Foul Brood), which are uncommon and the only chance that many beekeepers will have of seeing them in combs.

Information sources

What isn't generally understood is there is great variation in how bees are kept, yet there is much "standard information" that has encouraged a "beekeeping by numbers" and "one size fits all" approach. I visit a lot of different beekeepers and see a lot of bees in different locations with

different forage and climates. I know beekeepers who live in areas that are marginal for bees, often with poor crops in their home apiary. If they have an out-apiary 10-15 miles away the same bees do well. They often need different management methods, yet the same information is available and taught. Variations can depend on many things including geography, climate, forage and soil type. A local example is that in WGBKA we have members on clay, sand and chalk soils. These may support different forage and depending on the weather there may be different moisture levels in the ground. Very often I have heard beekeepers at WGBKA meetings discuss widely differing amounts of nectar coming in. For these reasons, information sources should be treated as a guide only, but modified by the beekeeper depending on what they see in their own colonies. It is also important to understand that in beekeeping, what happens this year may not happen the next. I give below a few reliable sources of information.

There is some information on the "Practical Beekeeping" page on the WGBKA website Practical Beekeeping (wgbka.org.uk).

Dave Cushman's website Bee Keeping & Bee Breeding, along with other interests of Dave Cushman (dave-cushman.net) is generally accepted as being the world's most comprehensive beekeeping website. All information is sound and is a well respected resource.

For diseases, the National Bee Unit (NBU) website Beebase - Beekeeping information resource for Beekeepers (nationalbeeunit.com) has good disease related information, but I don't find it easy to navigate.

The Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders (BIBBA) website has a lot of reliable information. There are over 60 recordings of webinars Webinars - BIBBA. Some are presented by me. There are also "Live@the Hive" recordings that reflect how ordinary beekeepers keep their bees and some of the things they find when opening a hive. There is a signpost to good videos here Recommended YouTube Videos - BIBBA

There are some recordings of past lectures given at the National Honey Show Lecture Videos (honeyshow.co.uk).

Books

We have a library that is available at meetings. Unfortunately, it hasn't had anyone managing it efficiently, so it has become rather neglected. It hasn't been helped by some people being slow readers!

There is a book page on the WGBKA website Book Review (wgbka.org.uk) with a hint of what you might be well advised to avoid!

I am not trying to sell books, but there is so much "information" and "advice" in beekeeping that is often copied from elsewhere that may be unreliable or inappropriate in some cases. To highlight some of these, I have written *"Beekeeping: Challenge what you are told"*, where I ask readers to check for themselves. They may find things different from what they are told.

Your beekeeping

All beekeepers have a system that, although it may be similar in many respects to others, will be different from them. Even before acquiring bees, you will have decided how you will manage them, so already you have a system. Yours is based on many things including how you have been taught, what you have read or been told, your own observations, your location, the type of bees, your interests and the time you have available. That will keep changing all the time you have bees because you will learn more and change your circumstances, so will modify what you do. Don't be frightened to abandon what you do if it doesn't work, but having gained experience, you should have a little knowledge to help you decide what you replace it with.

A grossly overused saying is something like "If you ask X number of beekeepers you will get Y number of answers". That is usually because others have a different system to you, they are inexperienced or you may not have given the full information. If you want to know something, just ask one person.

Try to learn what I call "The Basics" Basics (dave-cushman.net) at an early stage. These are all factual things that will help you understand what happens in a colony, so will help you to understand what a technique is trying to achieve. There is little point in performing a swarm control technique if you don't know what is happening in the colony when the bees are preparing to swarm.

Bees naturally live in tree cavities. To manage our bees with care, it's helpful to understand how bees live unmanaged, so we can replicate it as near as we can. There is little written, apart from this page Natural bee nest (dave-cushman.net) and two videos Honey Bees in the Wild - PART 1 - What can we learn from them? by Roger Patterson - YouTube and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7CB8E7jKBc You need to remember that Tom Seeley is from North America, where honey bees were introduced, so the behaviour may be a little different than here.

You need to be observant, so you can spot something different from normal. It may be a problem or nothing to worry about. You won't know that until you have gained enough experience to tell. Lateral thinking will tell you from what you see in a colony what is likely to happen in the future and when. Often you need to deal with things on time, e.g. when a colony is preparing to swarm. Tomorrow can often be too late.

There are pests and diseases that all need identifying. Some are common and aren't much of a problem, though we have two notifiable diseases that have been here for a long time. Two notifiable pests are considered so serious by the Government that they were made notifiable in 2006. They haven't arrived yet, but are likely to be introduced on imported bees. The key with pests and diseases is to know what normal looks like, anything different should be investigated. We have Bee Inspectors who deal with diseases, but they can't inspect very often, so beekeepers should be vigilant.

Conclusion

I hope these notes have been helpful. They will be updated if required, so if you have any comments or suggestions for additions, please let me know.

Roger Patterson.

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