DonTip *by Don Honey*

KEEP SUPER

I am pretty certain that most beekeepers' hives consist of a brood box topped by one or more super boxes. So with that in mind, give some thought to the following idea of a "**KEEP SUPER**". As the word suggest, the Keep Super is kept by the bees all year round. It should also always be kept above the brood box. I mention this because some beekeepers put a super below the brood box over winter as a food source, a concept that I am firmly against. If you have done this and want to know more, then look at my **DonWay** info sheet "In at the deep end". Most beekeepers consider Spring to be the start of the beekeeping season. Personally I view Autumn as the time to start getting your hobby ready for the next 12 months. If done correctly, using the KEEP super concept should help avoid losing bees over winter and having to get replacements in the Spring. This can be costly both in finances and time.

The basic principle to using the Keep box is that the bees always have enough **Honey** to get them through the various times of year when forage is not available. Undertaking the concept of a Keep box can be started at any time of the season, and once in place, you'll consider it to be the normal and a sensible bee practice that all beekeepers should do.

Spring Inspection

If you already have a super above the brood box and no queen excluder is in place, then take off the roof and crown board (and in my case also a mesh screen) to reveal the Super. The bees almost certainly would have moved up from the brood box to access the Honey and most likely the queen would have started to lay in it. The main focus for this first Spring inspection is to check that the bees have survived the winter. If you are greeted with that nice buzz, then the next thing to do is to find the queen and put the queen excluder between the brood box and super (you don't have to do what I do, by putting the word KEEP on the super box, but it does help to reinforce the concept. With an empty super box within reach, look through the Super one frame at a time, and if the queen isn't on a frame, put it in the empty super. Make doubly sure of this, but as the super frames are smaller than brood frames, and the number of bees will be low at this time of year, then she should stand out. Also make sure you put the frames in the empty box in the same order they come out. Any brace comb at the bottom of these frames can be removed at this point.

The likelihood is that the outer frames will still have capped honey, but as you get to the middle frames, you are likely to see a domed area of uncapped cells where the bees have come up to eat the honey (*see right*). It is also likely that you will see signs of brood. Continue to look for the queen. Once found, encourage her to go down into the brood box, by whatever method you are happy with, just so long as it is not smoke! Then add the queen excluder followed by the super. Depending on what point you found the queen will dictate how you fill one of the supers with frames. If you have gone through all the super frames and **not** found the queen, and you are confident that you did not miss her, then take off the now empty super and place the queen excluder over the brood box and place the full super over the queen excluder. It is not obligatory to have a super with the word KEEP on it, but for me it helps. Having put the super back, this now means that the brood configuration is no different from when you started, with the exception that the queen excluder is now in place.

The house bees will be familiar with this arrangement and continue to rear the brood as before, albeit that expansion in the nest size will go in a downward and sideways direction, rather than being in the super frames. If you did not see the queen, or any signs of brood in the super, then you should continue to look for **brood only** in the brood box. I would suggest that it is enough at this time of year to just see signs of brood (no need to see the queen). This can be simply achieved by removing the dummy board and opening up enough space to look down between the frames where there is bee activity.

Heaven forbid that there is no brood, but whatever you come across, just put the queen excluder in place, followed by the super and be patient for another week. Your next inspection will be a lot easier because as you look through the super you will either see signs of larger larvae or capped brood or nothing other than stores. If you see eggs, then you know there is a queen in this area, and again she should be easier to find on these smaller frames. If this is the case, then perhaps you should consider stronger lenses? If there are no signs of new queen activity, then continue to look through the brood box and do a "Normal" inspection. Assuming you see the queen/eggs, you can consider your season is now underway. No brood and no queen in spring in going no where!

The KEEP benefits

The contents of the Keep box will give your bees the best of starts to the season. They will be consuming their Honey, which has all the ingredients that they know and love - not some fancy fondant that needs them to collect water to digest. If you were as diligent as I am, then there would also be some frames with pollen content, also better than artificial patty. We control our bees by excluding the queen from the honey supers for our benefit, so it seems a small price to pay that we allow them the fruits of their labour with a Keep box that is just for them. This does mean a potential reduction in harvest for those beekeepers who depend or want a maximum honey crop. So you have to consider if you are a hobby beekeeper or a honey producer. I consistently get 50lbs of honey from each hive, which I consider to be a fantastic output. If I wanted/needed more, then I would have more hives, NOT squeeze every last ounce out of each colony. With the likelihood of brood being in some of the Keep frames, clearly these should not be used for honey extraction, but if you find yourself with another colony in trouble with low numbers/stores, the odd frame or two could be donated if the donor hive is strong enough (remember to carefully shake off adhering bees first). Without the Keep box concept in place, some beekeepers may find that the bees deposit some pollen in the super just above the brood box which is not ideal for honey extraction. Pollen is unlikely to appear in supers above a Keep box because the distance away from the brood is too far away for the bees to use for brood rearing. The point being that it is far better for this pollen to be available for the bees to use rather than to be part of the mix when honey is extracted.

KEEP containment

If you adopt the Keep philosophy, then a very real benefit will become obvious as you simply remove it and all its adhering bees at each inspection. Simply put a cover over the Keep box, and put it to one side as you inspect the brood box. All of those potential stinging forager bees are likely to be in this location and now out of the equation. As a general practice, no matter what boxes I am working with, any that are not being inspected are put to one side and covered with a cloth to stop the bees from flying. The bees seem to be content kept in the dark, rather than in the air looking for a beekeeper to sting! During the season, when it becomes important to look into the brood box, putting the Keep box at the top of the hive will make manipulation easier. Just put the Keep box to one side and cover, taking a moment to consider the weight, because this is going to be the winter feed. If you maintain at least 70% of stores in the Keep box throughout the whole season, then you should never need to artificially feed. The remaining 30% of space can be left for the bees to use at the end of the season for any late crop, even if it is the unwanted, fast granulating ivy honey.

Final thought

Large colonies at the end of the season might seem to be a good thing, but consider that large colonies need large amounts of honey. As stores are consumed, large areas are then created that can cause isolation starvation. Smaller colonies with a vertical store supply may well be more efficient. Please consider the validity of using sugar syrup, or GLUG, as I would describe it. Smaller numbers of bees in the colony will also reduce the number of over wintered varroa mites feeding on them. But that is for another day.

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