

THE BEES WILL TELL US IF WE ARE PREPARED TO WATCH

Wind in the trossachs

By Don Honey, Newbury and District Beekeepers' Association

As winter approaches and the temperature starts to drop, us humans start to think about how we can keep warm. If you are like me, then you would have started storing logs for the fire months ago. And as the winds whip up, start to think about how to keep out the drafts.

Thinking ahead

Well It didn't surprise me to observe that my bees too had started the process of thinking about winter as early as July this year. Their stores of honey had been building up from May, but they had also started to propolise the mesh I had placed over the porter escape holes in late July. I'm pretty certain my bees haven't been looking through my lounge window while that Scottish weather forecaster, Carol Kirkwood was on the telly spelling out what weather is on the horizon. So obviously the bees work to some sort of pattern when it comes to keeping their home fit for purpose. One reads about keeping our hives well ventilated, but left to their own devices, it would seem that my bees want to glue everything up to a point where it is virtually hermetically sealed! In West Berkshire, despite living in a 200 year old cottage, we don't seem to have the extremes of temperatures as can happen in the Highlands, and I also keep my bees in the "Cavity



Porter escape holes covered by mesh still get the propolis treatment.

design" WBC hives. So what can one anecdotally surmise from this?

Leave them to it

I do like to think that I keep up with modern ideas, and fully embrace the concept of mesh floors so that mites and other debris can drop through it, but I do draw the line at thinking that the almighty draught it can cause throughout the hive is a good thing. When building their home, bees must have considered all manner of criteria, from safety to practicality, so have we humans gone against nature and forced our bees to harden up and start wearing kilts? I leave my varroa tray in place virtually 95% of the time throughout the year because I cannot think that the bees would want it any other way.

Tray benefits

Apart from the point I make about draught, I also like to believe that any debris that falls, much of it sweet and tasty to any other little creatures that might want a free meal, won't invade my colony to its detriment. We are so often told not to leave scraps of comb or honey around the hive for fear of robbing, so why would

we allow such pickings to fall just below our precious hives? Personally I look at my varroa tray at every inspection and clean it before putting it back, making sure not to brush the detritus anywhere near the hives. Any build up would be an open invitation to all manner of little insects. I do remember being asked to do an inspection for fellow association members and



Wasps will sniff out any sugary deposits.

in the process came across ants on the varroa tray. I immediately said that I try to discourage ants from my hive, but was challenged by one member that both ants and bees can live side-by-side. Now that might be true, as is the fact that I could live side-by-side with my mother in law, but that isn't going to happen! It always impresses me when I see how quickly creatures can smell out a treat, try putting a plate of cakes on the garden table to see what I mean. It really is annoying, so why do anything to encourage unwanted visitors to our bees' home. Another benefit to keeping an eye on the varroa tray is that it

soon becomes clear when the bees are eating stores because you will see a line of cappings. And if you are using the newspaper uniting trick, then you will see the chewed remains of your copy of the Daily Mail as it has past between the frames. I wonder if you have experienced seeing wasps as you pull out the varroa tray. Those little blighters don't need much encouragement, so keep the tray clean. I have noticed that the tray has a lot of "give" in it, so one of my jobs over the winter is to see if I can find a sheet material that will give me a snug fit. This is going to be a bit of a pain, because all five of my



A trail of cappings on the varroa tray.



You can read a lot into what is deposited on the varroa tray.



Hard earned pollen that drops through the mesh floor.

WBC hives have slightly different size trays, so I will have to make and match each one individually, but I think it will be worth the effort. The snug fit will also reduce air flow, and the consequent temperature loss.

Open Mesh Floor (OMF)

OMF seems to have a great deal of advocates for its use as a means to ventilate hives, assuming that there is an issue here. There is discussion that both chalk brood and mouldy combs are reduced, along with a multitude of other benefits, but I come back to my original

observation that bees propolise gaps. I love mesh floors because it allows me to monitor what is going on in the hive without any disturbance to the bees. It allows me to keep the hive clear of debris. If there is a downside, then perhaps it is that pollen that drops off the bees and falls through the mesh cannot be recovered by them.

Observation

I have an open mind when it comes to keeping bees, but sometimes common sense should prevail. Just like my varroa trays, one size does not fit all, so my ideas may well be unsuitable for other beekeepers. This all stems from my original reading of beekeeping books that were clearly not aimed at WBC users, despite many of them having pretty pictures of this iconic hive on their covers. There appears to be a lot of opinion that cannot be scientifically backed up, which just leaves me with gut instinct. I would love to come up with a solution that helps with varroa, ventilation, hygiene, health, honey, swarming, crikey the list goes on and on. Perhaps we should install central heating? What we mustn't do is lose the passion for keeping bees.