

Chaos in the bee world

Larry Kregel

Perhaps because I was not around, I view the history of beekeeping as rather calm, slow moving, a staple part of man's involvement with nature. The times they are a changin'.

Today the world has become so interconnected, physically and communication-wise, that when things happen, they happen fast. We beekeepers are on for the ride.

Only a few decades ago those wishing to begin keeping bees would look for a beekeeper in the area who would make a split and sell it. Package bees were a novelty. The thought of importing a nuc from Georgia or California to Illinois... well, it was not even considered. Mail order queens? Pretty risky. The times they are a changin'.

Adding to the chaos, varroa, mass die offs and of course climate change. Indeed, a wild ride. We can yell, kick and scream (to no avail) or we can ride as a surfer rides an incoming wave.

Today, we get the word that the nucs we ordered are coming in (better late than never) in a week. Sorry, only Carniolan queens are available.

We do not know why only Carniolan, but it might be the hurricanes, floods, tornados, or just bad flying weather in the queen mating yards... well, it does not matter. We can yell, kick and scream (to no avail) or we can capitalize on the situation, an opportunity.

A bit about the Carniolan bees

In the late 1800's the USDA searched the world for the best bees and brought them to the US. The original black bee brought by the colonists in 1622 was a difficult creature to deal with. The hope was to find a better alternative. Hearing of more docile honeybee stock elsewhere in the world was inviting. Among the subspecies of honeybees brought to North America for their better personality and performance were the Italian, Caucasian, and the Carniolan. They won the allegiance of the American beekeeping community and the black bee moved into genetic obscurity.

The mood changed. In 1922, out of fear of importing disease and pests, the import of bees to the US was banned. That has largely held for the last 100+ years. In that time the purity of any of the imported races has been largely lost. Breeding programs have largely been focused on characteristics (e.g. honey production, mite resistance, docility, swarm resistance) and not on race purity.

The race (also known as a subspecies) that has drawn an interest in maintaining its identity has been the Carniolans.

Why the name Carniolan?

Slovenia, a country with a long history of keeping bees, was the home of a bee that had learned to deal with long cold winters. The Carniolan bee – considered native to the Carnolia part of the country - was known for its gentle nature and had the reputation for responding rapidly to the environmental changes. When a nectar flow arrives, the queen quickly responds by increases her laying. On the other side, the queen reduces laying in the fall leaving a smaller population to feed for the winter.



Part of the accommodation to cooler environs, Carniolans tend to begin foraging earlier in the cool of the morning and forage later in the cool of the evening. They also tend to wait for cooler temperatures before beginning to cluster.

They exhibit a resistance to disease (particularly EFB) while it is suggested that less treatment is needed to handle mite infestation. Add to this the fact that they use less propolis (sounds good to me) and interestingly studies show that Carniolan workers live 12% longer. (Sounds like a car salesman!)

The Carniolan is not dark like the black bee or golden like the Italian, tending to be a fuzzy grey with dark gold stripes.



How can they be kept pure?

As with the other races of bees imported at the turn of the last century, Carnies (our affectionate nickname), their true nature began to be lost through inbreeding. Susan Coby, a notable name in the Carniolan world, accepted the challenge for renewing Carnie stock.

After petitioning the USDA for 20 years, she received permission to import Carniolan semen – not bees, not queens, only semen – to the US. She travelled to the mountains of Slovenia and collected semen from drones that was frozen in liquid nitrogen and returned the US where it was instrumentally inseminated into the local Carniolan stock. Ultimately purity was reinvigorated. Sue's strain of Carniolans is termed New World Carniolans – NWC.

Is it perfect? No, but it is as close as we can get.

For all the above reasons, many prefer Carnies over queens of other races. I understand.

An interesting sidelight

The Buckfast race is one that has some following among our fellow beekeepers. It comes with a great back story. Brother Adam devoted his life to breeding from many races to develop the best bee. Buckfast bees are the result of a lifetime devotion to a super hybrid. It is the opposite of the Carnie's story where the goal is preserving the original race.

Well, some like vanilla, some like chocolate. I understand both.



We are getting Carnies

For those who are getting a Carnie nuc when they expect another. It's not so bad. A nuc that comes from stock known for being gentle, good honey produces, wintering well, and disease and pest resistant. That sound ok to me. Perhaps the chaos is working out OK.