

## **Beginners Timetable – A Help Sheet.**

For a variety of reasons modern beekeepers need to be much better beekeepers than was formerly the case, and in some areas need to be up to speed very quickly. These notes are intended to help the beginner in the early stages, and I have devised the following suggested timetable that will give them something to aim at, although people, bees, and situations can vary considerably. It should be seen as a minimum requirement.

There are two sides to learning about bees – theory and practical. Learning the “basics” is the first step and I have listed them below. They are all factual and can easily be learnt from books, giving you the information needed to manage your colonies well. The practical side can be learnt by experience and watching and listening to others, and this is where BKA meetings are useful. There is absolutely no use inspecting a colony if you don't know what you or the bees are trying to do.

My list of “basics” includes:-

- The life cycles of the Queen, Drone, and Worker
- Identify two notifiable brood diseases, American Foul Brood (AFB) and European Foul Brood (EFB)
- Understand the life cycle and treatment for *Varroa Destructor*.
- Understand the swarming process

### **Suggested Timetable for beginners.**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Colony Inspection**

There is a lot happening in front of you, so don't try to take too much in. Try to handle the combs gently, but don't worry too much about what is on or in them. If you have any fear then the person supervising you should detect this and help you. Don't worry how long things take. The most important thing is to be a confident bee handler.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup>**

Be aware of the three castes i.e. queen, drone, and worker. Their roles can either be learnt from your tutor, or other sources, but the sooner you learn them the sooner you will understand many things that happen in a colony.

Be able to see eggs and young larvae.

#### **3<sup>rd</sup>**

Be able to recognise and name the main hive parts, and know their uses i.e. Floorboard, Brood Chamber, Queen Excluder, Super, Crown Board, Roof, Frames and Foundation.

Light a smoker and keep it alight. This is one area where many people have problems, but is absolutely crucial. Keep practicing away from the bees if you want to. Once you have mastered it, keep a constant lookout for fuel that suits you.

Recognise pollen and liquid stores and know their uses.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> onwards**

Be able to recognise queen, drone, and worker cells, and brood in all stages. The earlier you can assess their ages the better.

Learn off by heart the lifecycles of each caste. This is most important and will help you assess the state of a colony and help you address many of the problems that might arise. It is absolutely crucial in any method of swarm control.

Recognise healthy brood in all stages. If it doesn't look right there is probably something wrong with it. Refer to the CSL booklet "Foul Brood Disease of Honey Bees: Recognition and Control". There are some excellent photographs on Page 5. Do not get paranoid about diseases, but a glance at a comb or two in every colony should be part of your normal inspection, and takes no time at all.

Understand why 9 or 14 day inspections are needed.

Be aware of varroa.

You should now have enough knowledge to open a colony on your own and understand its workings. The knowledge gained so far should help you to progress further.

#### **Before August**

**Varroa.** Understand the life cycle as this will help you understand treatment methods. Learn about the current treatments that are available, and be aware of IPM techniques and the reasons for their use. Learn how to monitor mite levels as this has become a very important part of beekeeping. It is important that you know the levels of mite infestation both before and after treatment. Varroa and the viruses it vectors has probably become the biggest killer of colonies, and it would be disappointing for a beginner to lose a colony when simple measures would have saved it.

Most beginners will only be putting one colony into their first winter, so to avoid disappointment read the section on **wintering** in our booklet "**Basic Beekeeping**".

Of course some of the above can be learnt before you have your own bees, and you should take any chance you can to handle a colony. Although I wouldn't advocate getting stung deliberately it wouldn't be a disaster if you did. It is surprising how many people take up beekeeping with great gusto and give up quickly because they don't like getting stung.

By the end of the first season you should as a minimum be able to open a colony without help. This will give you the basis on which to further your knowledge during the winter, ready for your first full season in the spring. Can I suggest you concentrate on the following subjects:-

- Queen substance. This is a pheromone which should be seen simply as a chemical stimulus. There is no need to go into any great detail, just try to understand the influence it has.
- Study honey. It is hygroscopic, find out the relevance and possible results.
- If you intend selling honey be aware of the regulations.
- Investigate the uses for your hive products. There are many books on such things as cooking, honey drinks, candle making, polish making etc.
- Plan for the coming season.
- Learn the principles of queen rearing. Speak to someone who regularly rears queens and beware of those who "just let the bees get on with it". Bees can be rapidly improved without any great knowledge or equipment.

Providing you had sound tuition and have learnt how to handle bees with confidence you should be able to open a colony, recognise its condition, and deal with the more common situations.

By the end of the second season many people are actually very knowledgeable and competent and will be able to:-

- Dispense with gloves.
- Dispense with bee suit so that you are only wearing a veil or tunic.
- Find a queen.
- Be able to clip and mark a queen.
- Recognise the signs of EFB, AFB, Varroa, Braula, Nosema, Acarine, and Chalk Brood, but bear in mind you may never see some of these.
- Be able to recognise Small Hive Beetle and Tropilaelaps in both adult and larval forms from photographs.
- Clear supers, extract, and process your own honey.

If you have got this far well done. I hope you enjoy the craft and I ask you to try and encourage and help others, and remember:-

Don't do anything unless you understand clearly what you are trying to achieve, what the end result should be, and have a "Get out of jail" card up your sleeve. In beekeeping you often need them.

Roger Patterson.

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