

Patterson's Page

By Roger Patterson, Wisborough Green BKA

Some people have the view that it is negative to look backwards. I think that I am a positive person, but I see looking back as a way of studying trends which may help to modify the way we do things now.

The longer you keep bees, the more you realise there are changes in beekeeping, some may not be quite as you think, others are more obvious. There are new or different things thrown at us all the time, some of which I highlight below, but all are things we have to take notice of.

Wasps in mid-winter!

Daisy is a beekeeper who lives a couple of hundred yards from me. She is a good naturalist and notices things that are different. In January 2014, I took my dog, Nell, for a walk. When I got back home I had a message waiting on my phone from Daisy that went something like: "Roger, you had better come and see what is happening, because you won't believe me if I tell you". I visited and there were wasps freely going in and out of one of her colonies. Subsequently they were robbed out. A few days later I went to treat my colonies with oxalic acid and wasps were going in and out of one of my hives, that only a couple of weeks before was well stocked with food and quite strong. They too were robbed out. Two winter losses for uncommon reasons.

I know you can say I should have checked mine earlier, but there is normally no need to check in the middle of winter and many beekeepers have their bees in out-apiaries where they may not see them for a few weeks. I have never known this before and it set me thinking. Frosts in the autumn and early winter normally kill off wasp nests, but not this time. There were so many wasps that we had the impression there were several nests. There is very little that can be done, because bees are in cluster or semi-cluster and the wasps, being tougher than bees, simply steal the food that surrounds them unopposed. There is no point reducing entrances because bees cannot defend them.

A few weeks later a number of randomly selected beekeepers were invited by the BBKA to indicate their winter losses and the reasons. Perhaps there should be

another reason on the questionnaire in future! There was little sign of the real problem inside the colony and I am sure most beekeepers would not expect their colonies to be robbed out by wasps in January anyway. I doubt if Daisy and I were the only ones to lose colonies in this way.

I did a web search and discovered that, apparently, European wasps were accidentally introduced into New Zealand in military supplies during WW2. They have become widespread and often overwinter, when the nests become far larger than the ones we are used to seeing. This should concern beekeepers if our winters become warm enough for wasp nests to overwinter, and something we may have to add to the list of things to look out for.

Regular disease checks will limit their spread

I have been called out by five of our Wisborough Green members because they thought they might have foulbrood in their colonies. One was one of the worst cases of sac brood I have ever seen. I understand why the beekeeper was concerned, because some cells looked very much like American foul brood (AFB). Two cases were European foul brood (EFB) about twenty miles apart, so probably unconnected. Two were chalk brood, which in some cases can also look like EFB. One beekeeper was concerned because she had been given bees by one of those with EFB. I was pleased that in each case the beekeepers had spotted a problem and had sought help.

At Wisborough Green we constantly remind members to check the first frame taken out of a colony that has brood in all stages. I think this should become a habit for all beekeepers, so that the mind is concentrated when opening a colony. I do not think the advice I often hear, to only check at the first and last inspections of the year is sufficient. I think this advice is misread from NBU where they suggest a minimum frequency. Foulbrood can appear very quickly and in the meantime the beekeeper is aiding the spread.

Foulbrood is rarely seen by the vast majority of beekeepers and that is the

danger. The key is to recognise healthy brood and to investigate if you spot a problem. In all of the cases mentioned above this is what happened. In the two cases with EFB, there was chalk brood too, which confused the issue. In one of them I could not easily see the gut full of bacteria that is usually a tell-tale sign of EFB.

It is my view that associations have a major role to play in controlling disease, and checking brood is very important. This can easily be part of the culture at demonstrations in a teaching apiary, but the demonstrators must be on the ball. It is not good enough to continually preach apiary hygiene, because it can fool beekeepers into thinking they will not get disease, so they do not look for it. At a recent lecture I heard that disinfecting your hive tool and smoker between each colony and washing your bee suit after each session will prevent disease. It will not prevent it, at best it might slow down the spread if you already have it. Your eyes are the best beekeeping tools there are, so use them.

When I started beekeeping in the early 1960s, all the books of the time mentioned sac brood as if it was a major condition, but apart from the odd cell, I have rarely seen it until a few years ago and wondered what the fuss was about. It has become common again and is something the newer beekeeper has to deal with. Why the change? I do not know, perhaps aggravated by varroa, perhaps not.

Look, compare and question

Getting back to my earlier point, things are changing all the time, some faster than others. As beekeepers we need to be aware of them, but this can only be done by observing what is happening in your colonies and noticing the difference from what we have seen before. Observing and seeing are two very different things.

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