

Patterson's Page

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There are a few beekeeping sayings that get trotted out with great regularity; two of the most common ones are "*The bees don't read the books*" and "*Ask six beekeepers a question and you get a dozen different answers*". There are variations on the wordings of course and they are all said as if the person delivering them is the first person to have thought of them. I will look at them both in turn.

Reading the books

The cynic might suggest that bees do not read the books because some of them are not worth reading! Alternatively, perhaps bees have struggled to understand what the author was trying to get them to do and got confused, so given up. Very often we try to humanise bees and do things on the assumption that they are capable of thinking along the same lines as us, but they are not.

If I hit a problem, I try to understand how a colony of bees in the wild would deal with it. They have survived for millions of years without our 'help', so they do things by instinct and rarely get it wrong. 'Reading' a colony is something I touched on in the last Patterson's Page. A colony of bees is telling you something all the time and they are pretty good teachers, but are we good learners?

A lot of what we do goes against what bees do naturally. They live in cavities in trees that are usually taller than they are wide. This makes it easier to store food and consume it when they need it, by simply moving the brood nest up and down, depending on whether food is coming in or not. We squeeze them into a small, unfamiliar space, remove combs with holes in and sometimes we force them to live in a cavity where they have to expand horizontally. This can result in isolation starvation that I suspect rarely happens in a wild colony.

When bees build comb they cluster on the bottom, but with foundation they are forced to cluster on the side. We often give them 100% worker foundation in the brood box, then complain when they turn some of it into drone comb. In a natural nest there is usually 10–15% drone comb, built on the periphery, yet we often put it in the centre. I agree with using one frame of drone comb per brood box, but it needs to be placed close to the side of the box where the bees expect it to be.

Bees naturally place pollen among the honey as they store it, so it is available during the winter and early spring, but in a hive they often place it in super combs that will be removed by the beekeeper and lost to the bees. When we feed, it is often fairly rapidly, so there is little chance of them storing as much pollen as they would naturally, so nutrition can become an issue. The beekeeper who goes down the garden with a jug of syrup every few days is likely to do their bees far more good than the one who feeds in one go. The regular but gentle feed will encourage the bees to forage for pollen which will get stored in cells, then a little syrup or honey placed on top and capped to preserve it. Simple observations will tell us what the bees need. Perhaps, instead of accusing the bees of not reading the books, we should be accusing ourselves of not reading the bees.

Too many answers

The reason the same question results in several answers is probably because there are indeed that many correct answers. But why ask six people the same question in the first place? What can be

achieved other than confusion by seeking so many opinions? I try to avoid answering a question if I know other people have been asked, and I have learnt, when asked a question, to ask several in return, so I can build up a picture of what the real problem might be. Very often the full information is not given; therefore interpretation is likely to be varied.

Advice at a national level often varies due to conditions, for example the timing of adding the first super may be different in Northumberland and Cornwall. This needs to be taken into account when reading a book or magazine article, and writing one for that matter. Answers at a local level may depend on varied experience. The vast majority of beekeepers only have a small number of colonies and their methods are probably based on what their mentor or teacher did. This might work fine for their operation, but might not be helpful in another situation.

There is a lot of prejudice and I have often heard equipment or methods rubbished by people who have probably never used them. Why do people do this? Well, it may have something to do with what is termed the 'comfort zone'. If they have only used Hoffman frames in commercial hives, then any other methods of spacing in a different type of hive is unfamiliar territory, so it is easier to discredit it.

We must consider ourselves lucky that bees are very adaptable and will make the most of what is thrown at them. We could make it much easier for them by trying to understand them and observing what they are telling us. Take a simple topic, such as swarm control. Imagine the variation to a fairly simple question, such as "*How do you prevent swarming?*". The answers could include using larger hives, clipping queens, regular inspections, using less swarming bees, adding supers or the description of a large number of swarm control methods and their variations.

I have recently written a page on Dave Cushman's website <http://www.dave-cushman.net/bee/natbeenest.html> about how I think bees would have lived in the wild before intervention by man. Some of it is conjecture, but based on my observations gained from removing many colonies from wild situations over a long period. I have done it in the hope it will encourage beekeepers to understand the needs of bees better. I hope the bees read it! ❀



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