



# Swarm Catching Using Bait Hives

By Gary Lewis

# What is a Swarm?

- From Wikipedia:

“.... A new honey bee colony is formed when the queen bee leaves the colony with a large group of worker bees, a process called swarming. In the prime swarm, about 60% of the worker bees leave the original hive location with the old queen. This swarm can contain thousands to tens of thousands of bees. Swarming is mainly a spring phenomenon.....but occasionally swarms can happen throughout the producing season. Swarming is the natural means of reproduction of honey bee colonies....”

# Advantages & Disadvantages of Swarms

- Advantages:
  - They are Free (Nucs cost £140 - £180 each).
  - They are excellent at drawing out Comb (on fresh foundation).
  - A swarm caught means it isn't affecting the public.
  - It is a means of conserving honey bees.

# Advantages & Disadvantages of Swarms

- Disadvantages:
  - May contain disease.
  - Will be headed by an Old Queen (or be queenless)
  - The “Swarm” could be a Cast, small in size with a virgin queen.
  - Will require feeding.
  - Unknown origin.
  - Unknown nature (could be nasty)
  - Unpredictability of catching them.

# Making up a Bait Hive

- A bait hive is made up of the following (from the ground up).
  - Stand.
  - Floor.
  - Brood Box
  - Crown Board
  - Roof.

# Making up a Bait Hive

- What do we put in the brood box?
  - One or two frames of old comb (make sure this old comb is disease free, i.e. reputable source)
  - Nine or ten frames of foundation.
  - Swarm Lure
    - This can be either a wipe or a phials.

# Costs of making up a Bait Hive

I've used "seconds" to make up my bait hives, these have been obtained from the Winter Sales organised by two major manufacturers in the UK

- Floor circa £14
- Brood Box circa £17
- Roof circa £18
- Crown Board circa £8
- Hive Stand circa £6
- DN4 (Brood Hoffman) Frames circa £29 (for 50)
- Brood Foundation circa £8 (for 10)
- Lure £2 - £4
- Total cost ~ £80 per bait hive.

# Methodology

- The more bait hives the more chance of catching a swarm.
- The more locations you have your bait hives the more likely you are to catch a swarm.
- Estimated success rate is around 30%.
- Look to be putting your bait hives out towards the end of April... A swarm in May is worth a load of hay etc..
- In the 2013 season, from five hives I caught three swarms, a hit rate of 60%

# What to look for....

- Bees will be drawn to the hive by both the smell of the “old comb” in the hive and the swarm lure being used.
- Either check or get someone else to check your hives on a weekly basis. (Don't open a hive without wearing a bee-suit).
- Usually, there could be anything up to ten bees hovering around the hive at any one time.
- When this number goes up to 30+ then a swarm is imminent.
- The swarm usually occurs between Noon & 4pm and will take around ½ hour to fully enter the bait hive.

# A Swarm Entering a Bait Hive



# What to do when you've caught a Swarm?

- Do you need to move it?
- Leave it alone for a few days, swarm bees will have honey in their honey stomach, let them turn this into comb, so any disease in this honey will be disposed of.
- Feed! Feed! Feed!
- Treat with Oxalic Acid or Apiguard.
- Manipulate frames so optimising the drawing out of the foundation.

# How do I Feed my Swarm?

- Recommended syrup strength is 1:1 (1kg of sugar to 1 litre of water).
- I feed using a “Rapid Feeder”, this holds around four pints (2.3 litres).
- English Feeder (similar design) can hold around 6 litres (10 pints) of syrup.
- An average swarm will consume 4 pints of syrup in around 48 hours (2 pints/day).
- Feed for about a week. (8kg to 10kg of sugar)

# Feeders



# How do I Treat my Swarm?

- Two possible options, Oxalic Acid (preferred) or Apiguard.
- “.... Oxalic acid is also entirely a contact varroacide but only remains active for a short period and thus only kills mites that are currently on the bees. This is why oxalic acid should only be used on a colony that is entirely (or nearly) brood free.....The fact that it can kill brood is irrelevant since there should be no brood to kill at the time it is applied..” Wally Shaw, The Welsh Beekeeper – Autumn 2013.
- Swarms will only contain Adult bees, no brood.
- Application rate of 5ml of Oxalic Acid per “Seam” of bees.
- A new swarm will have around three or four “seams” of bees in it.

# What next?

- After about a week, check for the queen and/or eggs.
- Is the queen marked? If not, mark her.
- No eggs or queen present, need to re-queen.
  - Add a brood frame from another hive containing eggs (OK and advantageous to do this with a cast)
  - Introduce a queen cell from another hive (Again, OK to do this with a cast).
  - Introduce a fertilised queen (bought or in-house, Don't do this with a cast since virgin queen present).

# Beekeepers Rhyme

A swarm in May...

Worth a load of hay

A swarm in June....

Worth a Silver spoon

But a swarm in July...

Is not worth a fly

# Beekeepers Rhyme

Clearly, swarms early on in the year can develop enough stores & brood to survive the winter, in addition to providing some honey.

Swarms later on in the year will need extra help. Swarms can be combined. Brood frames from a healthy hive can be added to boost the swarm hive.

# In Summary

- We've talked about the advantages & disadvantages of using swarms.
- We've talked about making up a Bait Hive, materials and associated costs.
- What to do with the swarm, starving for a few days, then Feed! Feed! Feed!
- Treatment with Oxalic Acid (or Apiguard).
- How to feed 1:1 syrup, use of a Rapid Feeder.
- Checking for the presence of the Queen.
- What can be done to bolster a late swarm.