

## March Checklist

### Points to ponder~:

- Check your colonies have food.
- On a warm day that is above 10°C, make an initial 'quick' inspection to see how many frames the bees are on and whether the queen is laying.
- Do not waste time looking for the queen; look for brood.
- Seal or remove any colonies that have died out to prevent robbing and spread of possible disease, and investigate the reason for their demise.
- Consider feeding pollen or pollen supplement and syrup if the bees cannot get out because of bad weather.
- Ensure record cards are ready for 2021.
- Remove mouse guards and pest protection, e.g., for woodpeckers, when the weather is warm enough.
- Make up clean brood boxes with waxed frames ready for use.
- Test for nosema in hives that are not thriving.
- As soon as it is warm enough, around 14°C conduct a thorough disease inspection and check varroa levels to ensure treatments have been effective.
- The spring inspection is very important as it enables vital husbandry decisions to be made before any honey flows begin.
- Replace any older dark combs.
- Swarming: At the end of March, if it is warm and drones are being produced, watch out for swarm cells and swarming preparations. A warm March can produce a fast build-up, and bees that are prone to swarming or those that have no room may take you by surprise as they disappear over the hedge!

March is always an exciting time in the garden and the apiary. Overnight it seems, plants grow and lowers appear from nowhere. The bees have anticipated this time of renewal and encouraged the queen to increase her laying rate so that the colony can build and take advantage of the new forage. We saw last month that the colony is developing from the remnants of the old winter bees to the bees reared this year. It is a testing time for the colony and should the weather prove inclement the bees will need help to survive. If you are in an area where early pollen is not available it may be necessary to feed patties of pollen supplement or substitute. While these are never ideal they may allow the colony to continue developing until natural pollen sources are in abundance. Beware the sudden cold snap; winter is not yet over and it is still possible to have an extended period of sub-zero weather. This will make maintenance of the brood temperature (34–35°C) very difficult for the workers and they may need some help by being fed candy on top of the brood chamber.

If there is a fine sunny day when the temperature exceeds 12°C during March you should take the opportunity to check all is well inside the colony. Be swift and only concentrate on confirming all is well. This inspection should take no more than about five minutes and you should be aware that the colony is getting cold which will, in turn, upset the bees. The objective of the inspection is to ensure that the queen is present and laying well, has room to continue laying and there are sufficient stores for the rest of the month. Even if you have very gentle bees it is better to dress properly and have a smoker to hand. These bees have not been disturbed for some months and may take exception to the roof being removed from the hive. Once you have access to the brood chamber, remove a frame or two from the

outer edge to give working space. Then identify where there are adult bees on the frame and, using your hive tool, move the frames to open the gap there. Remove the frame with the bees on it and have a quick look on the faces of the frames to identify if any larvae are present. Check the brood pattern and then replace the frame. Remove the next frame with bees on and continue the process until there is no sign of brood on the frames. Do not look for the queen, this can be a waste of time and as long as you can see larvae you know there was a queen there in the last week or so. There is no reason to suspect the queen is not there if you can see larvae. Register how many sides of frames had brood and how many sides had more than a handful of bees. You should also register whether there were any stores on these frames. Having done the inspection and reassembled the hive you should note down and interpret your findings.

- No larvae probably means that there is not a queen in the brood chamber (she might be dead or she could be laying eggs in your supers!)
- You will probably have the same number of sides of larvae as sides covered with bees. More bees is good.
- You should have about six or more sides with brood on. Fewer may mean that this colony is not building well.
- There should be at least 5kg of honey stores. Less will mean the colony needs to be fed (however, some beekeepers will place a bag of candy on the crown board as insurance against the bees running out of stores).

Having finished and decided on the state of the colony just tidy up and leave alone for a few more weeks. You should also make sure that you have sufficient clean equipment ready for the forthcoming season. Check the state of spare brood boxes and supers. Prepare some frames with foundation both for the brood chamber and for supers, and finally plan for the season ahead.

Now is the time to consider if you want to increase the number of colonies you have and if you will be re-queening any colonies this year. Deciding on your objectives for the season at this stage will give you time to prepare and ensure you have enough equipment for future needs. Plans always need to be flexible as we have little control over the weather and must be ready to delay or advance our plans according to the state of the bees. Although obvious, it is worth stating that during spring when colonies are rapidly building you have many opportunities to solve problems with your colonies because they have time to recover once the problem has been resolved, albeit disease, lack of stores, poor queen etc. In late summer colonies will not have time to recover from any setback before winter arrives. So, now is the time to plan and prepare because in April you will be assessing the health of the colony and making sure it is in top condition to flourish in the summer.

A good way to learn is to visit as many beekeeping talks and demonstrations as you can. Watching others and hearing their approaches to beekeeping will help you learn the good and the bad ways to keep bees!