

Honey Bees

A talk by Paul Meadows, a Chelmsford Bee Keeper August 2024

Paul is a member of the u3a - so we all clapped him; he did advise us not to clap until the end but he was definitely worthy of great applause as his talk was so interesting. This was evidenced by the numerous questions that Paul was asked. But I must admit my head was 'swarming' at the end as I was a 'hive of industry' trying to note down the complex life of Honey Bees.

Paul has been a beekeeper for 6 years and has 13 hives from which he harvests about 250lbs of honey per year. His honey is the real thing, totally natural; from the hive, filtered into a jar and that's it. We were advised that many cheap honeys have been adulterated with sugar water and may not have seen that many bees; the majority of this honey comes from Argentina and China. We also learned never to heat honey, it can be warmed gently but a strong heat destroys much of its nutritional value.

There are over 250 types of bees in the UK and, despite the fear many have of being stung, bees only sting if they are really upset unlike wasps that can very be very nasty and aggressive. If a bee stings it is really committing suicide as the act of stinging rips out the abdomen and poison sac and the bee dies. The wasp however can sting multiple times.

Nasty, nasty wasp!

There was only one bee that gives us honey – Apis Mellifera- or the aptly named Honey Bee however a bee that was believed to be extinct in the UK – the Black Honey Bee – has been reintroduced at Abberton Reservoir (Colchester). *(I Googled as I found that interesting.....*

Around 1 million native honey bees, also known as the British Black Bee, are now occupying a total of 18 colonies at Essex & Suffolk Water's reservoir, with Essex beekeepers helping to protect and sustain the area's population.)

The bee colony is ruled by a single woman – the Queen Bee- she has to live in a temperature of 35 degrees and the bees work hard all year round to maintain this for her. Or at least the girl bees -workers- do the work, the boys – drones - are lazy and just eat, mate and try to keep the girls calm. The worker bees sting, drones do not and a Queen Bee will only sting another Queen Bee.

The Queen Bee is much longer and bigger than the other bees. The only time she leaves the safety of the colony is when she is due to mate. This she does with at least 30 drones and when all is done she kills them! She retains the sperm in her tummy and never mates again; Paul said “you never squeeze a queen’s tummy when you handle her”. Very understandable! The queen may stay in her colony anything from 1 to 5 years; to recognise and monitor the queen, beekeepers identify her with a drop of special paint on her thorax.

The worker bees - the girls – keep the hive spotless, Paul stated that if he left a piece of equipment in the hive they would clean that too. They care for and feed the Queen Bee defending her and her hive; tend the larvae and bring in nectar, water and pollen, make the honey and cap off the wax combs that protects the honey. This wax is made – by the workers – by chewing nectar and excreting it from their abdomen. What busy little bees! Well the girls are! Lazy, lazy boys.

Sometimes the Queen Bee moves on if the hive is getting too crowded, she will take half her bees with her to find a new home. This often accounts for a bee swarm , the queen is in the middle of this throng and her workers are keeping her at 35 degrees whilst scout bees go out looking for a new home. Quite often down a chimney! This is not a great place to group as removal from a difficult place can cost up to £3,000; swarms on trees etc. can be collected by licensed bee keepers who just ask for a donation. Bees in a swarm are normally very calm and placid as their treasure, their Queen Bee, is safely tucked inside the cone of bees. The swarm season is April to May.

In the early autumn the workers bees kill the drones, too much to keep these lazy boys all winter. When the days grow lighter the queen starts to lay eggs again, bearing in mind she has a pocket full of sperm, and the hive begins to fill with bees. Paul estimates in his hive he will have 80,000 summer bees but only 10,000 in the winter.

Bees do have enemies; the Verona mite that attaches itself to the bee and slowly weakens the bee by feeding off it, the hive beetle, mice- which will be killed by the bee and then mummified in bee goo, green wood peckers will hammer away at the wooden hives, badgers whom seem impervious to stings and cattle and deer that can knock hives over.

If you are unfortunate enough to get stung by a bee Paul recommends a credit card to scrape off the sting and poison sac as **quickly as possible** and a mix of baking powder and water may help to reduce the pain and swelling. A stinging bee exudes a pheromone and of course others will think 'my friend needs help' and may try and sting you too- in the same place.

Bees can travel up to 3 miles looking for pollen; they track the moon and sun so they can find their way back home. If she finds pollen she will then fly back to the hive and do a little dance – the wiggle dance- this shows other bees in what direction the food source is. *(I might try this to see if I can get the spouse shopping).*

Good unadulterated honey has therapeutic and antiseptic qualities; some wound dressings- particularly for burns and cuts - have honey impregnated in them, hay fever sufferers may be helped by eating local honey made from the pollen that causes their allergy. Good honey does not go 'off' and can last for years.

This was all fascinating information imparted to us in a humorous and enthusiastic way. Paul obviously cares greatly for his bees even though he says he is regularly stung even through his yellow Marigolds. Let's try and look after our bees.

Judi Embling