

Advice Note from Andy Wattam – National Bee Inspector

Feeding Bees

I have been out inspecting quite a bit recently and almost exclusively have come across bees which are starving, some to the point where their demise was only hours away – I have even taken to carrying syrup in the car with me, as, in general terms, beekeepers have nothing in stock for contingency feeding. In some cases I have had to pour syrup into empty comb and onto the top-bars for the bees to feed to get them going again as they were at that ‘creeping’ point which signs almost imminent demise of the stock.

A very sad state of affairs I am sure you would agree? – these are not isolated incidents, but on some days are reflected in every site we visit.

Also in many cases I am seeing increased levels of Varroa – this becomes more and more ‘visually’ evident in colonies which are short of food as the brood nest diminishes and the mites move onto the bees themselves. Again in some of the cases the beekeeper had neither thought about, nor prepared to carry out any sort of Varroa controls, or doing much in the way of monitoring. Can I emphasise again that where insert boards are used with Open Mesh Floors the boards must be made sticky before use, otherwise consistently low mite count will be realised, as the mites will simply walk off! Often back into hive to continue their quest.

I am seeing in lots of cases of people using icing sugar as a ‘Varroa Treatment’. It should be borne in mind that icing sugar is to be seen as a complimentary Technique to other forms of Integrated Pest Management. As a standalone it rarely has sufficient knock-down to achieve the full controls on its own unless it is done regularly, skilfully and with the correct Open Mesh Floor in place, ie: with sufficient drop beneath to ensure that the mites cannot return to the hive, and sufficient cover onto the bees – the value of just sprinkling icing sugar onto top bars is very questionable, although in some cases it has helped to keep the bees alive – by giving them something to eat!

Again something else which rears its head regularly is where a beekeeper has taken delivery of a Nucleus – filled up the compliment of the Brood Chamber with foundation and provided no supplementary feed – the bees are sitting there, just surviving on the drawn comb with no hope of expansion to survive the winter.

Please, please – heft hives to check for weight, look inside and see what is happening, Feed now to ensure winter survival unless hives are so heavy you can hardly lift them.

Keep an eye on the wasp situation and reduce entrances / set traps where necessary.

We are now approximately three weeks into a dearth of nectar, unless you are within flying distance of a specific crop which is providing something of value, and from what I can see in most areas a minimum of 10 days before the Ivy comes properly into flower to be of use.

23rd August 2011