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STAHLMAN BEEKEEPING

NOTES FOR 2025

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Swarming Season

Honey bees will swarm if certain conditions exist. Here in North Carolina, we are in an active period of bees swarming. April and May are usually considered swarming months. However, colonies of bees can swarm earlier or later in the season.

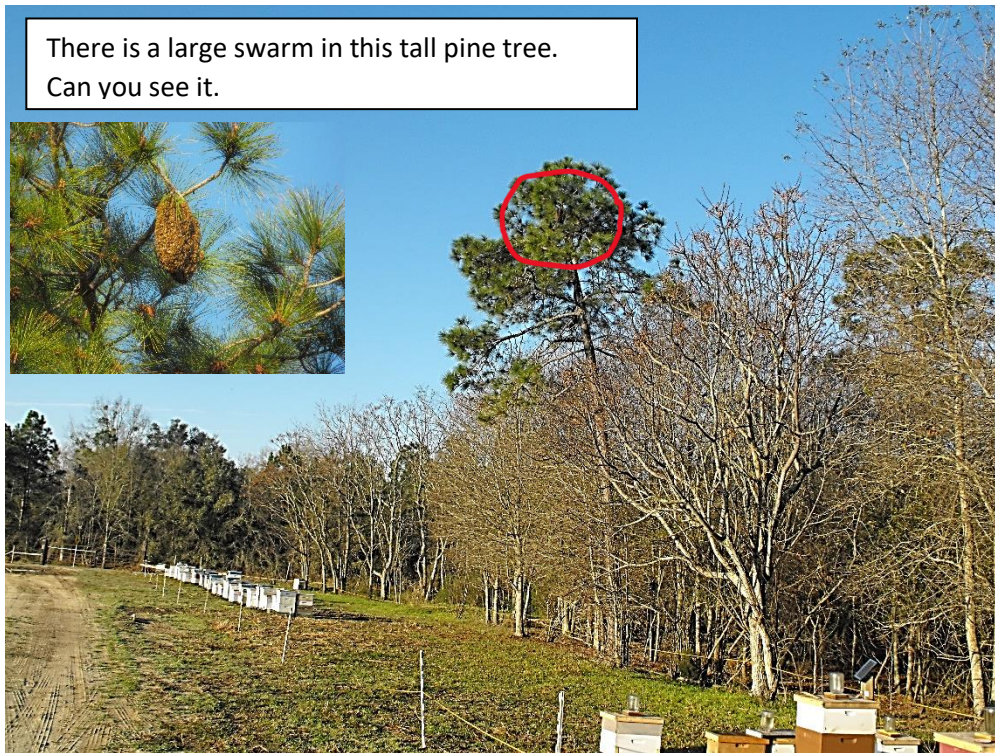
Although I have kept bees for a long time, I am still amazed by swarms. The sound of them rushing from the hive entrance will get anyone's attention immediately. The swirling mass of bees flying in the air is an attention getter and when they land and form the typical cluster on the object they select, it is time to try to capture them.

So much has been written about honey bees. Swarming is one act that deserves special attention. Bees have two notable qualities – they communicate and they think! We can clearly observe these two qualities if we observe what they do. Honeybees are referred to by Keith Delaplane in his book “Honey Bee Social Evolution” as a superorganism. He refers to the many mechanisms and properties that have evolved in the social evolution of honeybees. The point he makes about honeybees creating a “net energy contribution to the colony success” in all that takes place within the colony – each individual contributing to one or more projects – as “opposed to tasks performed serially, one component at a time.” Tasks in a colony are not singled out for one bee to do – rather the tasks are handled by a large number of bees. Thus, a swarm is part of the reproduction process. The reproduction process requires drones to be present to mate with a virgin queen (by the way the virgin queen will mate with a number of drones thus multiplying the diversity that helps with bees survival.)

Swarming is in the DNA of honeybees. As beekeepers we try to prevent swarming because it happens at the time flowers and trees are producing a lot of nectar and pollen. We depend on strong hives to produce honey crops. A swarm is a very interesting phenomena to humans. We produce children and send them off to make their fortune. Honeybees on the other hand, require the swarm to abandon the hive leaving all the wealth in honey and drawn comb behind to the next generation. The bees in the swarm are like leaving home with only the clothes on their back and the little amount of honey they can carry. They need to find a new shelter and they will under the best conditions be required to build comb, store honey reserves and do it before honey flows end. Oh, by the way, the old queen is not left behind, she is guided to the new nest by scout bees and the members of the swarm that made the decision when and where to go.

It is not often that beekeepers will actually be present when a swarm emerges from a hive. It is more common to find a swarm after it has flown a short distance from the hive it left. If the scout bees select a distant nesting site, swarms will settle where a queen lands. She must lose weight and have the stamina to fly to the nesting site. Often, she doesn't have the ability to fly

There is a large swarm in this tall pine tree.
Can you see it.



far or too high. Thus, one of the first things I do when driving into one of my bee yards is to examine trees and shrubs for swarms. Some times the swarm would be located where it would be possible to capture it. Other times they would be so high up in a tree that trying to capture it would be suicidal for me.

It was best to let this swarm relocate to the nesting site selected by scout bees. As soon as the queen in this swarm has regained the ability to continue the journey to the nesting site, the swarm will leave this location. Usually this happens within a day or so when the air warms up and conditions are favorable. This picture was taken in southern Georgia and the electric fence was used to keep cattle out of the bee yard.

A fact: Honeybees having determined they are going to swarm will try to swarm regardless of what method a beekeeper tries to use to stop them.

One of the easy ways to get a swarm:

Build a swarm trap If there are other beekeepers within a mile or so of your bees, the possibility is greater than counting on a feral colony (wild hive) to supply one with a swarm of bees.

- Nesting sites are selected by scout bees. Scout bees will range far and wide over an area of approximately 2 miles from their nesting location.
- Swarm boxes are easy to build and they don't need to be fancy. The size is important and it must provide a dry shelter.
- A must read is Honeybee Democracy by Thomas D. Seeley. He shares his research on the decision making by bees to find a new nesting site. Swarm boxes placed 10 feet above ground with an entrance of less than an opening of 2 inches are more attractive to bees than a bigger entrance at a lower location.



I don't have many pictures showing me working in the bee yard. Sometimes weeds get the better part of managing colonies of bees.

I am using a weed whacker in this photo. It was gasoline powered and made a lot of noise. **It is important to keep weeds down in front of hives.**

Honey flows are being reported as intense now and weeds obstructing hive entrances are not helping bees when they return with a load of nectar or pollen.

I don't recommend doing what I am shown doing in this photo. Anytime one uses equipment around bee hives, vibrations from motors cause bees to react to the vibrations not the noise. From experience, wear protective clothing and a good bee veil if this is the method you use.

Mowing in front of a hive is not wise when bees are flying from a hive entrance. Do it early in the morning before bees begin to fly or late evening – and not when they are clustered around the hive entrance. They will get you on the next pass by the entrance when you are mowing grass.

One solution to grass growing in front of my hives is putting something down to prevent grass from growing. If you have only a hive or two, you might buy a welcome mat to place in front of the hive. Otherwise, roofing shingles, sheets of plywood, old rugs, and weed barriers work well.

Even bees kept on raised hive stands face weed problems. Some beekeepers use herbicides to kill weeds but I have reservations about using them. **I would like to hear from you if you want to share your method of weed control.** Most of you will not see a situation as shown in the photo of me. Sometimes when one has out-yards, it is hard to get around to them all to prevent fast growing weeds.

What stands out in the picture is not so much the weeds. Take a look at the number of supers on each hive. This is what a good honey location will produce in a very short period of time. This picture was taken in the early 1990's and as you can see, each colony required no less than three honey supers. I will get into honey super management soon.

I would advise any of you to seek out all the information available about keeping honeybees. I have written articles for both ABJ, Bee Culture Mag., and the Speedy Bee no longer in publication. I realize that there is so much to learn and with the challenges facing honeybees, and we have a lot of new material to help us try to understand the [when, and what to do material applied to current beekeeping issues]. The wisdom, philosophy, and practice of keeping bees is not held by anyone single person. A case in point – I just bought Keith Delaplane's book "Honey Bee Social Evolution." I am learning that the honey bee is an ideal model system to study strategies adopted by an organism to survive over 300,000 years. Just maybe the honey bee will survive our current climate crisis, introduced pests and viruses, and resource limitations.