



STAHLMAN

BEEKEEPING NOTES

FOR 2025'

Published by Dana Stahlman Raleigh, North Carolina
Published free as a public service to anyone interested in honeybees. Email me to be added to my mailing list. stahlmanapiaries@aol.com

2025 Vol. 7
issue # 24

Troubles Ahead

There are a number of factors that lead to colony failure. I am reminded of the old adage that winter survival begins in the fall. Let's say it really begins earlier than fall. At this time of the year many beekeepers are taking honey off their hives. There are some beekeepers inclined to take all the honey and then feed sugar syrup to help bees survive. Some beekeepers look to the fall goldenrod/aster flows to help the bees gather enough honey to survive the winter season. And there are others who take only the honey they need for home use and some for gifts.

The fact is honey bees produce honey and, in some locations, the bees gather far more honey than they will use. I have often been asked this question: **How much honey do bees need to survive? I think the common expected answer is given as a number of pounds in reserve for winter survival.**

The expectation for many beekeepers is the bees will find nectar sources throughout the summer season and feeding is only required in the early spring and late fall. Honey or sugar syrup must be available at all times because bees must have food to survive. But the goal is to manage a colony so that it will have enough winter stores to survive the winter season. Most books and authorities will throw out a figure between 40 to 60 pounds. Under the chapter Honey Bee Nutrition in *The Hive and Honey Bee* published by Dadant, the figure of 150 pounds of honey per year is listed as needed by a colony of honey bees to survive in most U.S. northern states. Summer need is listed at 95 lbs. I am sure those figures are just estimates, but the actual number does depend on the amount of brood being fed and the number of bees in the colony.

The honey flow is over in my area of Raleigh. This is an area of lakes and Pine Trees and development. I noted that the bees are bearding a bit – which indicates bee populations are large and flying bees are looking for but not finding much to bring home to the colony. Thus, robbing activity can be expected. I put out a bucket with a little honey left over after filling some honey jars. This is what happened!



I am not sure if you have ever noticed that bees during a honey flow will fly right over exposed honey but when nectar sources end, this is where the bees go. They end up looking for any possibility of sugar in whatever form it takes.

I was always amused that during summer fairs and carnivals, the health department put out signs saying “Bee Sting station.” Not only are bees looking for food but yellow jackets and hornets join the fray.

I have often seen posts on the local beekeeper web site with a story something like this: “I checked my hive just last week and today there are no bees in the hive. They had plenty of food and looked like they were doing well.”

The first question I ask in a situation like this is how strong was the colony. Bees must defend themselves during periods of stress and population decline. I know that so much is written about how perfectly bees conduct life functions. But honeybees are vicious when it comes to survival. A colony being robbed is under attack not by one bee but a mass of bees from various colonies. It may start with one bee who was successful entering a colony and getting some honey. That is like someone seeing a Brinks Bank Truck spilling money out an open door as it is driving down the highway. Once the message is passed to others, the rush is on!



The best way I can share robbing is by showing a couple of photos indicating normal behavior.

This is a calm colony of bees. There is not much flight activity. Bees are guarding the entrance.

A picture like this is usually possible when taken early in the day often when the honey flow is over.



This is another photo of bees flying which may look like robbing behavior but it is not. Young bees take orientation flights which last for only a short period of time.

It is interesting to note that the first flight of a honeybee outside the hive is to get its bearings. This is home and this is where it must return.

The typical behavior is flight around the front of the hive with bees facing the entrance and hovering. They are not frantically trying to enter the hive.

Under normal situations, honey bees gathering nectar and pollen don't mess around. They are either entering or leaving the entrance in a back-and-forth flight pattern. Returning bees will often be carrying pollen. In robbing situations, you will not see this.



the hive

There is also a peaceful hum around a colony not being robbed. The area around the entrance is business as usual. It is normal to see a few bees checking and touching entering bees. These are guard bees doing their duty. Some bees loaded with nectar and pollen often land and rest before entering the hive. There is no fighting at the hive entrance.

Swarming on the other hand is a loud explosion of noise very easy to recognize. The bees circling the hive will be checking for other opening as well as seeking entrance to



This is a picture of bees cleaning up extracted honey supers left out to be robbed.

This is practiced by some beekeepers. Wet supers as they are called still have a lot of honey in them.

I might mention that it could start bees looking for other honey sources, such as a weak colony unable to defend its entrance.

When bees attack a hive being robbed, one can observe a zigzag motion to their flight and early in the process bees fighting at the hive entrance. When a full attack is on, dead bees can be seen under or at the hive entrance. A cloud of bees, frantic flight, and a lot of noise is a sure sign that robbing is underway.

Colonies that are attacked usually die or are weakened so severely that saving them is more a human kindness. So, how can one help prevent a colony from being robbed?

- Check colonies often for bee population. Weak hives need entrance reducers or something called robbing screens.
- Feed weak hives only late in the day. There is no better way to kill a weak colony of bees than to provide it with sugar syrup. Spilled sugar syrup or feeders at hive entrances will attract robber bees as well as ants. Use inside feeders if food is needed.
- Keep the time to examine a weak colony to a bare minimum.
- Be pro-active! [Don't wait for swarming to start.]



Check out the comb in the picture. Note how ragged the uncapped honey cells look. If this is observed in a dead out hive, look for wax chips on the bottom board.

Robbing is one-way diseases are spread to other colonies.



Note the ragged edges on the cell walls where bees removed the capped honey. The robbing stops when there are no honey stores to rob.