



Course Reports

2022 Improvers Course (February 5th)

One of the key events in the beekeeping year is the swarming season. So it was with anticipation that The Bee Improvers met for training at Gregynog Hall on the 5th February. A big thankyou to Rachel Kellaway for providing a really interesting and informative training session that focussed predominately on swarming and how to prevent it. I think it would be fair to say that the slide every one of us will remember is the one that said 'Don't Panic!'. And having been provided with such practical advice and guidance I don't think we will.

The session started with Rachel providing us with a couple of useful titles that would be good to read before 'swarming season' starts, the most useful of these being the BBKA publication 'Swarming'. Next up was a list of the kit needed for the year ahead. Some of this we already knew about e.g. the crown of thorns, and others that we met for the first time such as the 'one handed bee catcher' and the 'Butler cage.'

Rachel outlined the procedure for carrying out our first inspection. First of all, have a plan! This means choosing a calm day with the air temperature of 12C and, before opening the hive, observe the comings and goings at the entrance. Next, a list of questions to answer as the hive is inspected. Things to look out for include signs of dysentery and whether the brood is mainly drone brood. If so, time to get in touch with the experts. This is also a good time to put in a varroa board, prepare supers and make up record cards.

The rest of the session was devoted to swarming and its management.

Rachel emphasised that bees will naturally swarm when there is not enough space so it is vital to be on the alert for the first signs of swarming. There are a number of things to look out for such as a large amount of drone brood, a lot of queen cells or overcrowding. Rachel suggested a traffic light system to help. Green: if there are queen cups then just 'keep an eye'. Amber: there are queen cups with eggs, then keep a very watchful eye, Red: there is a queen cup being extended with contents – swarming imminent! Time to implement practical swarm control.

We learned that the queen needs space to lay, which means 10 available frames. If the brood box contains frames with lots of pollen these can be removed and replaced with foundation. If the queen is laying really quickly then put a super on and remove the queen excluder.

An alternative way to help prevent swarming is to split the colony. This is a process that requires a lot of thought as there are a number of different stages and possible scenarios to remember. It was great to have a dummy practical session at the end of the training where we were presented with 3 different situations. A 'willing volunteer' split a colony using 2 brood boxes, some empty frames and a nuc. The group assisted with advice but if it hadn't been for Rachel intervening, I'm not convinced the split colonies would have had much chance of survival. We let Rachel demonstrate how to use the one-handed bee catcher and Butler cage, definitely a piece of kit that will require practice

This was an excellent session to start the bee keeping year. At 'half time' we enjoyed the opportunity for coffee and a catch up on the progress of our bees. We left feeling well informed, excited and perhaps a little nervous about the year ahead!

