

Annual Report – National Bee Unit – Western Region

Review of 2012

The weather dominated our beekeeping in 2012. Drought through the winter and early spring of 2012 culminated in record high temperatures at the end of March. After that it was mostly dire – the wettest summer on record in England, with average temperatures well below average.



The bees could often not get out to forage, and colonies struggled all through the season with shortages of both pollen and nectar. As a result, brood rearing was often stop/start; we saw colonies starving, even in July; whenever there was a break in the weather, colonies swarmed; the new queens often failed to mate or to mate properly, resulting in drone layers or early supersedure; and colonies have gone into the winter weaker than normal and often short of stores.

An outcome of this was very poor honey crops – the BBKA survey showed averages in Western England down by some 75% to a paltry 8lb per hive. It also meant that pollination of crops, in particular orchard fruit, was seriously impaired. Walking round the orchards in summer and looking at the very poor fruit set was a depressing experience - and more so for the growers. It provided however a graphic demonstration of how important our bees normally are in the environment.

Given the problems experienced in the season, it would be advisable to take special care during this winter and early spring that your colonies have enough stores. Heft your hives, and if you are in any doubt about the adequacy of stores, we recommend feeding fondant, placing it over a feed hole in the crown board immediately above the cluster, using an eke or empty super if necessary.

Inspection Report and Beebase

Western Region covers - Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Midlands & Worcestershire. (Cheshire has now moved into Northern Region, and Avon and North Somerset are now part of the South West Region.)

There are now 2,469 'current' beekeepers registered on Beebase in the Western Region. This however substantially understates the actual number. Contrary to what some believe, being a member of the BBKA or a local association does not automatically get you registered on Beebase – and we believe that not much more than half of Association members are in fact registered. There are substantial benefits in registering – for example, you will receive

an automatic email alert if foulbrood or exotic pests are found in the vicinity of your apiary; you will get emails with timely best-practice advice; and we can come and check your bees and give advice in person (no charge!) if we do find foulbrood or exotic pests nearby. So I would urge you to register now if you have not already – it's free, quick and confidential. You can register [here](#), or search for 'Beebase' online. There are also lots of tips, advice and downloadable leaflets on disease control and husbandry.

In 2012, 409 new beekeepers were registered in Western England region which includes 252 self-registrations.

The 2,469 registered current beekeepers ran 3,617 apiaries and 16,149 colonies – an average of 6.5 colonies each.

The breakdown by county is as follows:

	Number of Beekeepers	Number of Apiaries	Number of Colonies
Gloucestershire	492	717	4252
Herefordshire	215	383	1257
Shropshire	443	606	1945
Staffordshire	233	361	2273
Warwickshire	340	590	2020
West Midlands	345	358	2116
Worcestershire	401	599	2286
WESTERN ENGLAND TOTALS	2469	3614	16149

We inspected 2,794 colonies (17% of the total), compared to 1,894 in 2011, up by 48%, largely thanks to our two new SBIs – Keren Green and Colin Pavey.

We found European Foulbrood (EFB) in 95 colonies, or 3.8% of those inspected, compared to 2.3% in 2011. EFB was found in 40 apiaries, or 6.1% of those inspected. Because we target inspections on higher risk apiaries, these percentages will be higher than the average incidence across all colonies/apiaries. (The recent large scale Random Apiary Survey (RAS) showed a national average of some 1.2% of apiaries with clinical EFB. It also, importantly, found no evidence that EFB was endemic – highly sensitive molecular analysis of adult bee samples found few cases where the EFB organism was present in adult bees without clinical symptoms showing in the brood.)

We found AFB in 14 colonies, all in one unfortunate beekeeper's apiaries in Herefordshire. The affected colonies were all destroyed and our follow up in surrounding apiaries has found no evidence of spread.

You can see more detail of disease incidence, with maps and statistics going back several years, on Beebase [here](#).

Exotic Pests

As part of our normal inspections, we carried out 50 specially targeted inspections in Western Region for notifiable exotic pests (viz small hive beetle, and Tropilaelaps) in apiaries close to identified risk points (eg ports, garden centres, honey packers etc.)



No sign of these damaging pests was found in Western Region, or anywhere else in the UK. However there is a high risk that one or both will enter the UK in the near future, so continuing vigilance is essential. To this end the NBU has, *inter alia*, established a number of sentinel apiaries in risk areas. The beekeepers managing these apiaries are monitoring their colonies, checking floor traps and regularly sending in samples of floor scrapings to our lab for sensitive forensic/DNA tests. We would like to thank those beekeepers for their valuable continuing assistance.

Information on the exotic pests is available on Beebase [here](#) and [here](#).

Varroa

The core statutory role of the Bee Inspectorate is the discovery and control of foulbrood and exotic pests. But the major threat to honey bees in the UK (and worldwide) remains varroa. So during the course of our inspections, and in our training activities, we aim to advise beekeepers in best practice for the management of varroa.



Unfortunately, the quality of varroa management is patchy. We see many cases where colonies are severely weakened, or killed, by excessive levels of varroa and the associated viruses.

A good proportion of beekeepers are on top of the problem. But we do see some beekeepers not treating their colonies; or treating at the wrong time; or not following the instructions on the approved medicines; or using ineffective and potentially illegal 'snake oil' type remedies.

The latter are often described as 'hive cleansers' or some such to get round veterinary medicine regulations. But in fact using them on a hive with bees in is not permitted. In addition, their use can lead to a false sense of security as they are likely to work partially, giving an increased mite drop, but still leaving a damaging level of mites in the colony.

Full information and recommendations on how to manage varroa are available on Beebase [here](#).

In summary – unless you absolutely know that your mite levels are low, the minimum treatments we recommend are: an approved thymol based treatment (ie: Apiguard, Apilife Var, or Thymovar) in late summer (ideally starting in early August); plus 3.2% oxalic acid in syrup trickled in mid winter, when the colony is most likely to be broodless.

Officially, Bayvarol and Apistan strips are still permitted, but we do not recommend their use, as mites have developed resistance to the active ingredients, and their effectiveness is likely to be less than that of the thymol treatments.

NB - if you use other chemical treatments (unless prescribed by a vet), and they are detected in your honey, you could be prosecuted.

As well as the chemical treatments above, there are several husbandry methods, described in the online information – such as comb trapping and selective brood disposal - which can be effective if applied properly and conscientiously.

Asian Hornet

Although not an officially 'notifiable' pest, the Asian Hornet (*Vespa velutina nigrithorax*) can have a significant impact on bee colonies.

As far as we know, the Asian Hornet is not yet here; but it has rapidly made its way from Bordeaux to Northern France in only about 7 years, and it is thought highly likely to arrive in the UK in the next few years.



You can find out more about this pest, how to monitor for its arrival, and what to do if you find one [here](#) on Beebase. If we find it early, it may be possible to eradicate it, so it is well worth being vigilant.

Proposed changes to managing and controlling pests and diseases

DEFRA has launched a public consultation on bee health following a review of our current policies on managing honey bee pests and diseases.

The review was undertaken by the Food and Environment Research Agency, on behalf of Defra and the Welsh Government, with the NBU, representatives from commercial and amateur beekeeper associations and an independent scientist.

The consultation is seeking your views on the proposals which emerged from the review. The closing date for this consultation is the 9th March 2013. For further information, and how to respond, please click [here](#).

2013

The 2013 bee inspecting season starts on 1 April, when our seasonal bee inspectors start work again.

The Western Region inspectors and the broad areas they cover are:

	Areas covered	Phone	Email
Keren Green	South Worcestershire and Gloucestershire	07901 517779	keren.green@fera.gsi.gov.uk
Justus Klaar	Warwickshire and parts of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, West Midlands	01384 352177	justus.klaar@fera.gsi.gov.uk
Charles Millar	Shropshire and North Herefordshire	01694 722419 07775 119476	charles.millar@fera.gsi.gov.uk
Julian Routh	Warwickshire, Staffordshire, West Midlands	0121 354 5956 07775 119477	julian.routh@fera.gsi.gov.uk
Colin Pavey	Herefordshire and the Forest of Dean	07775 119471	colin.pavey@fera.gsi.gov.uk

To find your inspector, enter your postcode on BeeBase [here](#), or call the NBU on 01694 462510.

Here's to sunny days and full supers in 2013.

Charles Millar, Regional Bee Inspector, National Bee Unit,
Western Region

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