

Annual Report – National Bee Unit North East Region December 2012

The 2012 Season – An Overview

The season for the NBU Inspectorate started in the last week of March with the annual technical training seminars at Sand Hutton at a time when colonies were building up strongly after a mild winter and early spell of near record temperatures for the time of year. In many areas the bees were foraging well and there were reports of colonies with full supers and early swarms where beekeepers had been caught out by the rapid expansion in colony size. As the saying goes, ‘all good things come to an end’ and I am sure no-one really needs reminding how true this turned out to be! Balmy conditions rapidly deteriorated, a near drought gave way to cold and wet weather with near one foot of snow falling in the hills above Whitby and floods elsewhere. Knowing what was in store, John Drakes worked all weekend to control an early recurrence – well spotted by the beekeeper - of AFB in the coastal region of North Yorkshire and was fortunately able to complete inspections in the immediate area just as the bad weather closed in.

Most colonies, fuelled by the early honey flow, were still expanding rapidly as large areas of brood emerged in hives full of adult bees unable to forage. I am sure that in all my years as a beekeeper I have never seen such populous hives in early spring and it really shouldn't have been a surprise when colonies saw the slightest break in the poor weather as an opportunity to swarm!

The wettest summer in 100 years followed with severe flooding in many areas resulting in a great deal of hardship, not just for householders but also farmers and beekeepers – I know of several hives washed away when swollen rivers burst their banks. The weather conditions made life difficult for the Inspectorate too with many inspections having to be cancelled or postponed. However, credit must go to Harrogate and Ripon BKA and the beekeepers in the area affected by the EFB outbreak in June for their cooperation and for holding the umbrella whilst Dhonn and Sandra continued with their inspections in, sometimes, quite inclement weather! I am sometimes asked, ‘What do Bee Inspectors do when it's too wet to inspect bees?’ My answer (a little tongue in cheek but with much honesty) is, ‘Look at their own bees!’ Bees are a lot more resilient than we sometimes credit them. However feedback from the Inspectorate nationally finding colonies perilously short of food prompted the NBU to twice issue a warning about potential starvation.

Good swarm control is particularly important in seasons like 2012. Many colonies that swarmed or were split did not manage to raise a new queen for themselves. Mating opportunities were few and far between and some simply became queenless whilst others were later found to have drone layers.

Queens that mated late or were poorly mated didn't last the summer and many were superseded late on. Beekeepers who retained good laying queens from the previous year did at least have the chance to reunite to produce a viable colony. Queen rearing, particularly early in the season, also met with little success.

Unusually for the larger part of the North East Region there did seem to be a shortage of pollen in late summer that may have caused some colonies to shut down early and there is a real concern about the viability of small colonies or those without good numbers of young 'winter' bees. Manley, in his book 'Bee Farming' reckoned that colonies need 6lbs of stored pollen going into winter – I suspect that this amount will not be available to many colonies this year. I know some beekeepers applied pollen or pollen substitute patties after the winter feed in the hope of keeping the queens laying that little bit longer and others will be using them to help stimulate the queens into lay early next year.

Colony Losses 2011-12

The figures presented are derived from information gathered during inspection visits to approximately 180 beekeepers, a lower number this year due to the increase in disease incidence and other factors. The combined average from across the region is 13.0%.

Region	Colony Losses (%)				
	2007-8	2008-9	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Derbyshire	31.2	34.4	21.1	14.8	14.3
East Yorks	50	19.8	14.6	15.2	13.6
North Yorks	34	11.7	29.9	11.3	14.1
Nottinghamshire	48.3	15.7	12.6	16.3	10.7
South Yorks	56.5	30.7	36.8	12.7	12.2
West Yorks	35.7	21.6	19.1	20.3	11.5
County average	42.6	22.3	22.4	15.1	12.7

Due to the fairly small sample size these figures may not be entirely reliable but do support the general consensus that the mild winter and early start to the year helped keep overall winter losses down. There was also much less variation between counties indicating that there were fewer individual large scale losses. It is pleasing to see the continuing downward trend since the severe losses in 2007-8, but after such a poor season the general condition of colonies going into winter this year is not so good and gives rise to concern that losses will be higher again, particularly if there is a late cold spell. Over the next few weeks we need to check regularly that colonies have sufficient food and are protected from the weather and pests.

On a positive note *Varroa* has generally been less of a problem this year. Smaller colonies in late summer and sometimes long broodless periods prevented mite numbers building as high as usual. However, we should continue to monitor during the winter period and treat with an appropriate product to ensure that colonies get off to a good start in the New Year. For further advice on *Varroa* control, please see the free NBU booklet 'Managing Varroa' or BeeBase, <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase>

Foulbrood Diseases and Inspection Statistics 2012

A total of 3223 colonies in 660 apiaries were inspected in the North East region this year. There was a further increase of incidence of EFB with 62 colonies affected in 23 apiaries. Some of these cases were in areas previously affected and it is possible that stress on the bees due to bad weather and poor available nutrition caused some colonies to succumb to disease from a low level background infection. Further cases were tracked back to movement of colonies from an infected apiary; however, there were also cases in new areas, notably the Harrogate district of North Yorkshire. There was a significant increase in EFB incidence in Derbyshire and Notts this year which kept Tim Roper, (SBI for the area) very busy. It is worth noting that the single outbreak of EFB in Nottinghamshire is thought to have occurred due to the use of second-hand equipment that was not properly sterilised. Beekeepers purchasing second-hand equipment are reminded that old comb should not be re-used and all hive parts should be sterilised – please see the fact sheets on BeeBase at <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/index.cfm?pageid=167> for further information and recommended procedures.

The incidence of AFB this year was actually lower than 2011, thanks to the efforts of Pete Allanson, SBI for the area, in tackling the outbreak in East Yorkshire. However it was disappointing to have an isolated recurrence in the Scarborough district after a year without this disease in the area.

The locations of foulbrood disease by 10km squares are listed in the following table.

County	10km Square	Colonies with EFB	Colonies with AFB
Derbyshire	SK32	12	
	SK36	1	
	SK37	2	
	SK43	1	
	SK44	1	
	SK47	3	
North Yorks	SE35	11	
	SE45	2	
	SE63	1	
	SE77	1	
	SE79	1	
	SE86	8	
	SE99		2
East Yorks	TA15		1
Notts	SE64	8	
South Yorks	SE50	2	
	SK29	3	
	SK49	1	
	SK59	1	
West Yorks	SE21	1	

All the figures presented here along with maps and regional trends over several years can be found on the public pages of the National Bee Unit website, Beebase, www.nationalbeeunit.com. Click on 'Bee Diseases' in the menu and then on 'Disease Incidence and Maps'. I suggest that it becomes regular practice to review these pages, to assess whether there is any foulbrood disease in your area.

One of the common misunderstandings is that, as a registered member of a local Beekeeping Association you will automatically be listed on Beebase. Unfortunately that is not true, so if you haven't yet signed up to Beebase I would strongly recommend that you do, so that these figures can be a more accurate representation of beekeeping in the UK. By including your e-mail address you will receive an alert if foul brood disease is found within 3km of your apiary. Self registration also gives the benefit of being able to edit your personal details, keep records of your own inspections and add new apiary sites and other information.

Exotic pest surveillance programme

The following map shows the risk locations currently registered on Beebase for Northern England. These are the places where NBU considers there is an increased risk of the entry of exotic pests such as Small Hive Beetle (SHB) and where inspectors will make higher numbers of inspections especially to

look for SHB and *Tropilaelaps*. In the 2012 season the NE team made 90 exotic pest inspections, over 13% of our overall inspection visits.



A further move to try to combat the entry of exotic pests has been the establishment of a number of sentinel apiaries. In these a beekeeper is asked to check their colonies for exotic pests and send floor debris or any suspicious findings to the NBU laboratory for examination. All necessary equipment and paperwork is supplied and the beekeeper sends a log of the inspections to the NBU at the end of the season. This year sentinel apiary holders were also offered a modified wasp trap to monitor for the possible incursion of the Asian hornet, *Vespa velutina*. Fortunately none have been found so far – I think any self-respecting hornet will have sought warmer climes! – But this aggressive exotic pest is spreading rapidly in France, Spain and Belgium and it is probably only a matter of time before it reaches our shores. Please look at the dedicated pages on BeeBase for detailed information on the Asian hornet. I would be happy to add one or two more names to my list of volunteers of sentinel apiary holders – particularly if anyone has an apiary close to one of the risk points.

Education and Advisory Services

The North East Region team of Bee Inspectors again supported a number of District Association training events and provided comb workshops to help beekeepers with disease recognition in several locations during the season. The two Bee Husbandry Day events at Murton and Sheffield aimed at the improving beekeeper with some experience were again very well received. Three more are planned for 2013, two based at Harlow Carr, Harrogate and

another at Murton. The Northern Husbandry & Research Day, organized as a joint training initiative between the National Bee Unit and the Beefarmers Association was held at Fera, Sand Hutton and attracted a good number of commercial and larger scale beekeepers.

Please get in touch if any Association would like me or one of the Seasonal Bee Inspectors to be involved in any summer programme events – the diary is already filling fast!

Honey Statistics 2012

During early autumn I usually contact a number of beekeepers throughout the region to assess honey yields and prices. In past years the averages for our region have been combined with those from the other regions of England and Wales to give the national statistics.

This year it was decided in addition to send out a questionnaire to all the BKA district secretaries through the county associations to hopefully get a broader appreciation of honey yields from around the region. I had about 200 replies in total - some districts responding better than others.

It was noticeable that newer beekeepers were keener to respond, though quite a few had little or no honey and others said that they were leaving what there was for the bees. Perhaps some more experienced beekeepers were reluctant to disclose how little honey they had taken in what, for most, has been the worst season of their beekeeping career – I heard of one beekeeper aged 93 who said it was the worst year in his living memory!

In general terms there was some early spring honey in central and southern districts followed by a sporadic flow from oil seed rape. Very little else followed until the Himalayan balsam flowered though this usually very reliable crop didn't yield as well as expected in the lower river valleys but gave a reasonable crop in the higher reaches of the Calder and Colne valleys and parts of North Yorkshire. The heather on the Pennine moors and down into the Derbyshire Peak District started late and finished early with best yields reported as 5 to 10 lbs per hive. Yields on the North York moors where the heather remained in flower a little longer were hampered by the cold weather and were at best 15 lbs per hive. The absence of the 'Indian summer' that we have enjoyed over the last few years also prevented the ivy reaching its potential in the south of the region.

I have divided the region into areas as best I can from the results received based on total number of hives and is as follows:

County/District	Honey (lbs per colony)
Derbyshire (inc. Peak District)	10.5
Notts	34.4
Central North Yorks	33.6
West Yorks	24.9
South Yorks	34.5
North East	13.5
North West	4.0
York	35.7
East Yorks	21.5

The average figure for the whole region was 28.3 lbs per hive (46136lbs from 1628 hives in the survey). The best yields were as expected from the central and southern parts of the region that saw the best of what little fine weather there was and have the benefit (?) of oil seed rape. The far North East and North West of the region, hit by the worst of the weather and without the usual heather crop had particularly poor yields.

It was also interesting to look at yields achieved per colony over the whole region by beekeepers with different numbers of hives:

No. of Colonies	Honey (lbs per hive)
1-4	12.5
5-9	15.2
10-39	35.0
40+	32.1

Various conclusions could be drawn from these results, experienced beekeepers with larger numbers of colonies may have coped with the difficult conditions better than the newer beekeepers, but it could just be that beekeepers with larger numbers of colonies tend to manage their bees more with a view to honey production than the smaller scale beekeepers. The fully commercial beekeepers might be expected to record slightly lower averages as they have less time to spend tending to individual colonies.

North East Bee Inspectors

As previously mentioned it was certainly a difficult year for inspection work and I must express my thanks to the whole team for their dedication and support in what was, for me personally, a particularly difficult season.

There will be some staff changes for the 2013 season. Pete Allanson has moved to a full time job with Animal Health at Fera – whilst I congratulate Pete on his success I am sorry to see him leave the NBU Inspectorate. Sandra too is moving, not from the job, but her area of responsibility will now be in the

North West as part of Ian Molyneux's team. I have enjoyed working with both Sandra and Pete and wish them every success in their new roles.

We are not quite certain yet how we are going to manage the inspection work in the region for 2013. Much will depend on the success of recruitment of new staff in the early spring, but areas covered by myself and the remaining team members should be approximately as follows:

Ivor Flatman – West and South (West) Yorks
Dhonn Atkinson – Central North and West Yorks, South (East) Yorks
Tim Roper – Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire
John Drakes – North East Yorks and Teeside

The 2013 season starts on April 1st and from that date you can confirm who your local Bee Inspector is using the post code search function on the BeeBase contacts page or for enquires at any other time please contact me.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the Region's beekeepers a Happy and Prosperous New Year – may your bees be healthy and your supers full!

Ivor

Ivor Flatman
Regional Bee Inspector – North East Region
Tel. 01924 252795 or mob. 07775 119436.
e-mail ivor.flatman@fera.gsi.gov.uk