

Taking and Hiving a Swarm

Many people are taking up the craft of beekeeping for the first time. One way to get started is by obtaining a swarm. As the swarming season approaches, the National Bee Unit offers some advice on good practices when collecting and hiving a swarm.

- Do not attempt to take a swarm which is difficult to reach or if to take it would be dangerous.
- Make certain that you have the permission of the property or land owner before attempting to take the swarm.
- Be sure that you are fully equipped. Equipment should include a suitable stout container, such as a skep, robust cardboard box or a nucleus box containing frames of wax foundation. The latter is the preference of most beekeepers. If you chose to use a skep or box, then you will also need an old loose-weave sheet to cover or wrap the container and a piece of plywood (or strong cardboard) big enough to cover the open part. Additional equipment should include a smoker, a water spray containing water, a plastic cup, secateurs and a bee brush.
- Ensure that the area is clear of members of the public or livestock before commencing to collect the swarm.
- Assess how you intend to take the swarm, e.g. if it is on a bush, will it drop straight into the container, or is there a need to cut foliage away? If there is, ask the owner's permission before you start cutting the foliage. If it is on a post, would a skep be the best thing to use? If so, can the bees be brushed into the skep or will they need to be smoked upwards into it?
- It is very difficult to take swarms from enclosed spaces, e.g. inside walls — under such circumstances, consider whether swarm removal is safe or practical. If not, then it may require removal by professionals.
- If some bees are exhibiting waggle dances on the surface of the swarm, then your time to take the swarm is limited as they are about to depart to a new location.
- If you can, it is a good idea to secure your container in the position that you intend to collect the bees. However, sometimes you will need to hold the container, as firmly as possible, directly underneath the swarm.
- Before moving the bees into your chosen container, where possible spread a large sheet over the ground, directly underneath the swarm so that you can capture any bees that miss the container. Then either use a single, sharp, downward shake (if on a branch), dropping (if the branch needs to be cut off), or by brushing or smoking them. Look carefully to see whether you can see the queen. Bees not falling into the container will land on the sheet and walk in themselves if the queen is there.
- If you are using a nucleus box, one of the best ways of hiving a swarm is to take some of the frames out of the box (thus making a gap of two or three frames depending on swarm size), hold the nucleus box up under the swarm, then shake the bees sharply straight into the middle of the box, and place the box onto the ground. Carefully replace the frames, put the crown board on and allow the bees to settle. This simple method works well.



Bees swarming. Photos are courtesy of The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), Crown Copyright; images supplied by the National Bee Unit at Fera.



- Lightly spraying the bees in the container with water will help to settle the swarm.
- If you are using a nucleus box as your container, then swarm collection is complete and you can either leave *in situ* if in a safe place or move to an apiary location of your choice.
 - If you are using a skep or box, there are additional things that you have to do: put your sheet of cloth on the ground and then invert the skep or box with one edge propped up by a small stone or similar so that it leaves a small space large enough for a bee or two to enter as they move upwards. Some may find a sheet of plywood on top of the sheet useful.
 - Whatever type of container you use to collect the swarm, if there are bees gathering near this gap and fanning their Nasanov glands into the air, you have almost certainly collected the queen. If not, the bees may well emerge and return to their swarm position so you may have to start again!
- If the swarm is in an inaccessible place such as in coils of barbed wire or in the middle of a hedge, place the container over it or nearby as described above, take several handfuls or cupfuls of bees and shake them into your container. Normally they will fan their Nasanov gland so when this commences smoke the cluster to break it up and the swarm will reform in the skep or container.
- If there is a wind blowing and you cannot place the container over or under the swarm, place it upwind so the scent of the Nasanov glands from collected bees drifts toward the swarm.
- Once the swarm has re-clustered, if you are using a box or skep, wrap your container with the sheet and move it carefully to an apiary where you have a hive prepared to take the swarm. This is best done during a cool part of the day, such as the evening, as the swarm will generate a significant amount of heat when being moved. Before transferring your bees from the box or skep into the hive, ideally, you should use new, undrawn foundation — this will prevent the bees from storing any honey stores they have brought with them in their honey crops as they will use it in the production of comb. This reduces the risk of disease transference. However, if the swarm is taken late in the year and bees have limited time to draw out the wax foundation for their nest, then you may have to use clean sterilised drawn comb.
- When using new, undrawn foundation, place a queen excluder under the brood box for a couple of days. This gives the swarm time to build a nest and re-establish colony cohesion, thus reducing the risk of the bees absconding. This is not necessary if using drawn comb, which is readily accepted by the bees.
- There are two methods of hiving the swarm; it can be tipped into the top of the hive or the bees can be 'walked up' into the hive over a board covered with a sheet. This is often called 'running in'. (Note: if 'walking' the bees into the hive, only put the queen excluder in place after all of the bees are in the hive). If tipping the bees into a hive, make a gap in the frames into which they can be shaken.

Insurance Policy Notice: Under the BBKA insurance policy there is a height restriction of three metres when collecting a swarm. If you are working above this to collect a swarm, you will need to contact Towergate, the BBKA's insurance brokers, beforehand.

Other things to remember

- ❑ You will need to be sensitive to the weather and forage conditions to be sure that the swarm does not starve. After 24 to 48 hours check to ensure that the bees are drawing out the foundation and, if the queen is laying eggs, then the queen excluder can be removed. If not, offer the swarm a feed of 1:1 strength syrup (1kg white granulated sugar to 1260ml water) and recheck after a further 24/48 hours.
- ❑ If the swarm is a cast (i.e. a product of multiple swarming) and therefore headed by a virgin queen, she will need to go on mating flights. The queen excluder should not be left in place for longer than 72 hours.
- ❑ Once the queen is laying eggs you now have a colony instead of a swarm, and its development, health and wellbeing should be monitored as with any other colony. There is a clear link between swarms and potential spread of pests and diseases. So, if you do not know the origin of the swarm take it to an isolation apiary if available. When established it can be assessed and checked for disease before introducing it into an established apiary. These checks should be made over two full brood cycles — a minimum of six weeks. However, there is no harm at all in a longer isolation period. Some diseases (e.g., EFB) can take much longer to show symptoms, and some beekeepers may isolate for up to two seasons (years).
- ❑ If you are new to beekeeping, it is a great idea to get some advice from an experienced beekeeper about these methods before you attempt them yourself — the fastest way to learn is by watching an expert in action.

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