

# Top Pitfalls of the Novice Beekeeper

by Jason Learner, National Bee Unit

As we start the New Year, many beekeepers will be reflecting on the previous season's successes or failures and identifying areas where improvement could be made in 2015. Each year begins with high hopes, ever optimistic that the weather will stay fair, we will keep on top of swarm management and that we will extract supers so that they can go straight back onto the colonies to be re-filled straight away. However, despite our best efforts, one or two colonies slip away from us; pitfalls which could have been foreseen and avoided. This article presents some of the most common pitfalls highlighted by our bee inspectors and, where possible, offers advice on how to escape them.

## Lack of swarm management or swarm control

Swarm control can be a daunting task for any beginner. On the internet there is an abundance of information but recognising what advice to take, and what management practices work, can be a little overwhelming. With experience, all beekeepers learn to 'read' and sense when a colony is preparing to swarm. Some beekeepers are told that once day-old eggs are found in queen cells, all one needs to do in order to prevent a colony from swarming is to knock out swarm/queen cells. As a result, beginners are mystified when they have been doing exactly this and the colony swarms. Knocking out queen cells, along with adding supers for 'extra room' does not always work. This is because the colony will get so congested with adult bees and new brood coming through that the colony will want to swarm, no matter how many cells you knock out. As a



*Two prime swarms. This can be avoided with successful swarm control. All photos are courtesy of The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), Crown Copyright; images supplied by the National Bee Unit at Fera.*

result, beekeepers will most probably need to split the colony (finding the queen first and placing her back in the original colony) in order to prevent a colony from swarming. There are various methods for preventing colonies from swarming, including the Pagden method. Instructions on how to carry out such procedures have been described in *BBKA News* and you can seek advice from your local association.

## Lack of varroa management or control

Varroa is an endemic pest in the UK and its management has now become a routine and essential part of bee husbandry. Many beekeepers will remember the good old days before the pest's arrival when beekeeping was easier. Now the management of colonies is more involved and inspectors are sometimes confronted



*Bee deformities and malnourishment. A result of high varroa infestations.*

with colonies where little or no varroa management or control has been carried out. As a result, emerging bees are malnourished, deformed and colony productivity starts to decrease. As mite populations increase, colonies start to dwindle in size and symptoms which look very similar to foulbrood may be noticed. The need to monitor and manage varroa in a colony cannot be overemphasised. Although you are not able to see any mites or symptoms of varroa damage in your colony, it does not mean that they are not present. It is beneficial to treat your colonies before mite populations get out of hand. More often than not, once you start seeing symptoms of damage in your colony, especially nearing winter, it is too late as those bees which would have seen the colony through winter are damaged and too ill to support it. If you are ever in any doubt about how to manage your colonies, information can be found on BeeBase at <http://www.nationalbeeunit.com/> and in our advisory leaflet *Managing Varroa*. Alternatively, you are welcome to call the office and talk to us on 01904 405132.

## Fear of being stung; not using enough smoke when required; smoker going out

As you develop your venture in beekeeping there are some tips which will help you to subdue and manage a colony more confidently. Buying a good bee suit, which will reduce the fear of being stung is essential and will allow you to manipulate the hive in an assertive and confident manner. As a result, you will be less likely to crush and aggravate the bees and are less likely to be stung. It is also important to learn how to control and subdue a colony with a judicious use of smoke. This discernment comes with experience. In principle use enough smoke to prevent the bees from flying up at you but not so much that they start coming out of the entrance. In addition, it is very annoying when a smoker goes out. This happens to both inexperienced and experienced beekeepers alike. The most important element of a smoker is the fuel you use. One of the most useful pieces of equipment for quickly lighting a smoker is a propane torch which is cheap and easily obtainable. There is plenty of information about lighting smokers on the web. Have a look and see which method suits you best.



*Keeping a smoker alight can be a tricky task for a beginner. When using sawdust, placing grass or moss on top of the sawdust will prevent flames coming from the smoker when you are using the bellows.*

## Dirty equipment and lack of hygiene

One of the most important, and perhaps damaging, bad habits which beekeepers fall into, is storing dirty equipment and not practicing good hygiene. Poor hygiene not only attracts pests to the apiary or equipment store, but also spreads harmful pathogens and diseases among colonies. In order to tackle this there are some key items which will help improve both the hygiene of your beekeeping routine and tidiness in your apiaries and store house.

- ❑ Propane gas torch.
- ❑ A bucket containing soda solution and a wire scourer.
- ❑ A container to store old bits of burr and brace comb.
- ❑ A steamer for sterilising frames and melting old wax.
- ❑ Disposable gloves are a must and, at the very minimum, should be changed between each apiary in foulbrood clear zones. You may find it useful to wear more than one layer. This will increase the thickness of the material and offer greater confidence to those beekeepers who are new to the craft, and will also allow you to pull off the top layer if necessary.

## Not doing proper brood inspections

Proper brood inspections are important, especially in spring and autumn. All beekeepers should be familiar with the appearance of

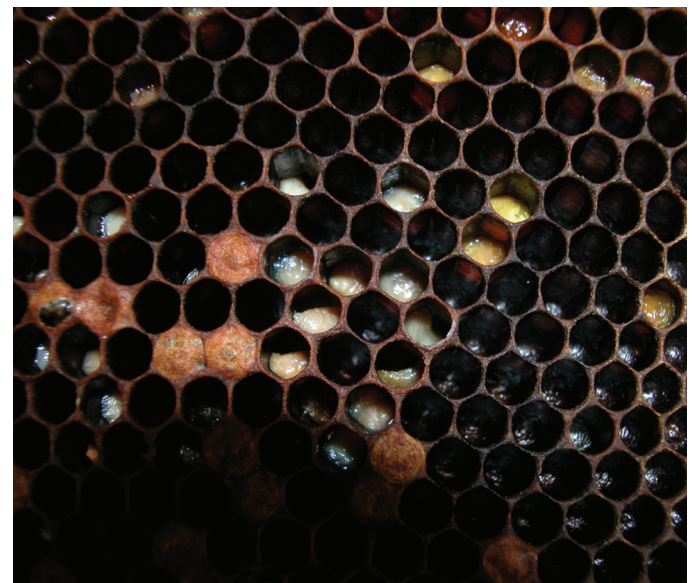


*Is your equipment stored neatly on transport?*

healthy worker brood, so that they can immediately recognise any abnormalities which may indicate the presence of foulbrood. In spring and autumn, check that all life stages of the bee are healthy so that any early signs of disease are spotted and prevented from being spread among your beekeeping operation. More information about how to do this can be found in our leaflet: *Foulbrood Disease of Honey Bees and other Common Brood Disorders*.



*A healthy frame of brood.*



*Brood affected with European foul brood.*

## Poor frame spacing

Feral honey bee colonies space comb at approximately 35mm centres. This leaves a space between each comb face, which allows the bees to work back to back between the combs. Beekeepers use a number of methods to achieve a similar and perpetual space between frames and over the century, many designs have been invented to help keep this measurement within a managed colony. Hoffman self-spacing frames are probably the most commonly used worldwide. Here in the UK, many beekeepers use this style (DN4 or DN5 frames for example) in the brood box and occasionally supers (SN4 or SN5 etc.). With the variety of different spacers and frames types to choose from, it is no wonder that beekeepers will sometimes end up with second-hand equipment or bees housed on different spacing. This can present an issue, making routine colony inspections difficult or slow and, in some cases, bees get crushed or damaged unnecessarily.

Of course, there are ways of resolving this issue, stick to one frame type and replace those that are not uniform. It will decrease the amount of time spent having to inspect a colony and make your operation far more enjoyable.





*Uniform frame spacing makes inspecting a colony much easier.*

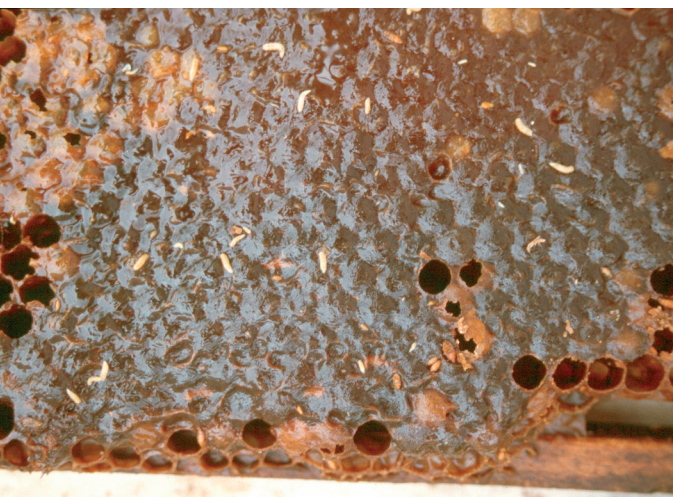
### Not extracting honey on time and letting it fall behind

This happens to many beekeepers. No matter how prepared one may be, tasks pile up and supers waiting to be extracted may get left to one side (hopefully responsibly). Supers awaiting extraction should not be left exposed, even when stored in a shed. These sorts of practices encourage robbing by bees that may carry harmful infections back to their colonies. All supers should be stacked together properly, with any holes being sealed with foam. The bottom of the stack should be covered with several sheets of newspaper and a crown board to catch any honey and the top with a bee-tight roof. If small hive beetle (SHB) were to arrive in the UK, a quick turnaround time (24–48hrs) for extracting honey supers would be required; otherwise, if supers are left with honey in, beetle and larvae populations within stored boxes could cause a lot of damage.

Combs infested with SHB become slimy and have a strong odour, similar to rotten oranges, caused by defecation of adult beetles and larvae and fermentation of honey.

### Not feeding adequately for winter

Ensuring that your colonies go into winter with adequate food and pollen is one of the most important tasks of the year. In fact, it could be argued that this is when the beekeeping season for the following year begins. When taking off honey in the autumn, make sure that your colony has stores of food to prevent it from starving. September to October is the time of year to feed sugar syrup as a



*Small hive beetle damage to honey comb.*

supplement to ensure that honey bees have sufficient stores to carry them through the winter. If you feed earlier than this period, the food will be converted to brood, so, unless there is a risk of starvation, it is recommended that beekeepers wait until then.



*If colonies have little stores during the winter, provide them with a pollen patty and some fondant.*

### Further Information

More information about the topics covered in this article can be found on our public website BeeBase <http://www.nationalbeeunit.com/> and in our advisory and information leaflets. If you have not already done so, please ensure that you register yourself as a beekeeper on BeeBase. The more beekeepers that are registered, the more rigorous our bee health surveillance can be and, crucially, the better our chances of intercepting and eliminating exotic pest threats such as SHB. BeeBase also contains details about available training and information for beekeepers, guidelines for importing and exporting bees, and the relevant legislation surrounding this and other aspects of apiculture in the UK. ✚

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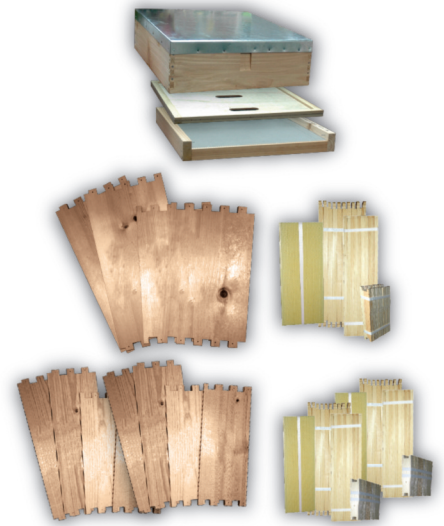


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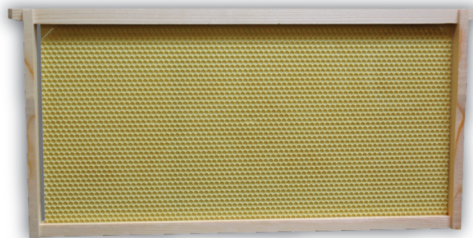


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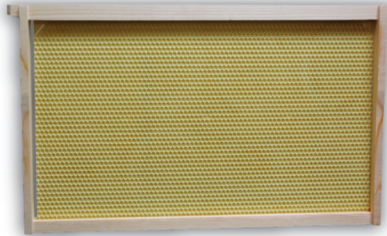
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