

"THE BUZZ!"

December 2007

An electronic newsletter from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's State Apiarist's Office

2007 Beekeeping season is over

The beekeeping season is over, and I hope your bees are healthy and your hives are full of winter food stores. The recent rains appear to have put an end to the drought conditions that have plagued Kentucky since early summer and may, with a little luck, assist in a nice spring nectar flow. But we'll have to wait awhile longer to see if that happens and turn our minds now to doing what beekeepers do in the winter: rest, repair equipment, make plans for next year, place orders for new or replacement supplies, and go to beekeeping meetings and schools. In this issue of THE BUZZ! I'll give a preview of the 2008 winter/early spring beekeeping schools, an update on the Colony Collapse Disorder situation, and some tips for beginners and beekeepers in general. And as we approach the holidays I wish to say Merry Christmas to all of you, and I hope to see you in the New Year!

Tips for new beekeepers and Beekeepers-2-bee

If you're planning to get started as a beekeeper in 2008, this is the time to start making your preparation. You'll want to begin by contacting several of the beekeeping supply companies and ordering 2008 catalogs. And if you have not done so, order a good beginning or basic beekeeping manual, cozy up in front of the fireplace, and read it. You might also wish to subscribe to one of the beekeeping magazines published in the United States. If you're online, I suggest you go to my Web page (link at the bottom of newsletter) and view my "Information on Becoming a Beekeeper", which includes recommendations on books, tips on purchasing bees and equipment, links to beekeeping suppliers (to order those catalogs), a list of Kentucky beekeeping associations, updates to the information in this newsletter about beekeeping schools in Kentucky, and links to some schools in adjacent states. If you are reading a printed copy of this newsletter and do not have Web access, I'll be happy to mail you information similar to what is on my Web site. At my Web page you can also download Dr. Tom Webster's "Beekeeping in Kentucky – A guide for beginners". Dr. Thomas Webster is Kentucky's beekeeping extension specialist at Kentucky State who will be teaching the beginning beekeeping classes at the Bluegrass Beekeeping School on March 8 (see article below). His guide is a very extensive manual, designed specifically for beginning beekeepers in Kentucky.

For those interested in purchasing package bees in the spring, the Walter T. Kelley Company will again have bees for pickup at its beekeeping supply factory in Clarkson, Kentucky, on Saturdays in April and May (must be pre-ordered). In addition to the Kelley Company, there often are beekeepers who have packages for sale on a smaller scale or who sell what are called nucs or nucleus hives (small starter hives). Some of our beekeeping associations collaborate on putting together package sales, so check with your local associations for information on these purchases and for the names of local beekeepers with nucs or packages for sale. Remember, if you wish early dates for package bee pickup or delivery, order early. Likewise, equipment orders are shipped as the orders are received. At some point in the winter, the suppliers receive orders more quickly than they can ship, so order shipments soon. I'll be at all of the beekeeping schools in Kentucky in 2008 (and at the Southwest Ohio Beekeeping School in Cincinnati), and I look forward to seeing old beekeeper friends and meeting new ones at the schools. If you have questions, be you a new or experienced beekeeper, feel free to contact me.

Feeding honeybees in winter & fondant candy

While our beekeeping is over for the year there is one task that can be done if necessary: emergency feeding of bees. While we cannot feed bees during cold weather (below 50°F), feeding with sugar syrup can be done during the not-infrequent warm weather spells we experience here in Kentucky. Feeding of bees with a cooked sugar candy mixture is also possible. So if you think that your hives are short on winter food stores, you will probably need to do some winter feeding. To view an information sheet on this topic go to the state apiarist's Web page (address at end of newsletter); for those without Internet access, let me know and I'll mail this information sheet to you. On the webpage the link is called "Tips on winter feeding of honeybees".

Kentucky Beekeeping Schools planning underway

Plans are now underway for several winter/early spring beekeeping schools that will be held in Kentucky in February and March. These schools are a great way for new beekeepers to get started and for those with experience to expand and update their knowledge. Since we are two to three months away from the dates of the schools, all the information (complete programs, lists of speakers, etc.) is not yet available. However, you can go to my Web page (see link at end of newsletter), where I'll continue to update the information about these schools. I'll also include links to schools in surrounding states.

February 9, Southeastern Kentucky Beekeeping School, Whitley City

We have a new beekeeping school being held this year in Whitley City, Kentucky (McCreary County). On February 9 (Saturday) the Southeastern Kentucky Bee School will be held at McCreary Central High School in Whitley City. For those of you who have never been to Whitley City, it is located about 30 miles south of Somerset (down U.S. 27) and about 20 miles west of Williamsburg. This school's location will give beekeepers residing in southeastern Kentucky a nice opportunity to attend a school without traveling all the way to Frankfort (though I hope some of you decide to come to Frankfort as well). This school is the result of a collaboration by McCreary County Agriculture Agent Greg Whitis, Whitley County Agriculture Agent Phil Meeks (Phil is also a beekeeper!), the McCreary County Beekeepers Association, and the Whitley County Beekeepers Association. I would especially like to thank Greg and Phil for providing leadership for this school. Some of the speakers for this school will be: Mark Lee - longtime Frankfort beekeeper and now Apiculture Assistant at Kentucky State University; Dr. Randolph Richards – longtime beekeeper and retired Allen County Agriculture Agent; Dr. Sean Clark – Agriculture Professor at Berea College who teaches the ONLY college level beekeeping class in Kentucky; Dr. Ray McDonnell – Biology Professor at Somerset Community College, Laurel Campus, in London, Ky., and a former Tennessee State Apiarist; Gordon Vernon - beekeeper and queen producer from Scottsville; Dr. John Strang - Fruit and Vegetable Extension Specialist at the University of Kentucky's Department of Horticulture; and Phil Craft – Kentucky State Apiarist. And there will be more; see my Web site for a complete list of speakers and the complete program. The folks in southeastern Kentucky are offering a very nice program the first year out of the blocks!

March 1, Audubon Beekeeping School, Henderson

On March 1 (Saturday), the Audubon Beekeepers Association will hold its third annual beekeeping school. This year's school will be held at the Henderson County Cooperative Extension Office in Henderson. Speakers will include Kent Williams – President of the Kentucky Beekeepers Association; Mark Lee - longtime Frankfort beekeeper and now Apiculture Assistant at Kentucky State University; Gordon Vernon - beekeeper and queen producer from Scottsville, and Phil Craft – Kentucky State Apiarist.

March 8 - Bluegrass Beekeeping School, Frankfort

On March 8 the Bluegrass Beekeeping School will be held at Kentucky State University (same location as 2007) in Frankfort. Speakers will include: Dr. Rick Fell - Virginia Tech University; Dr. Stu Jacobson - University of Illinois in Springfield; Adony Melathopoulos - Lacombe Research Centre, Beaverlodge, Alberta, Canada; and Dr. Tom Webster - Kentucky State University. A vendor tradeshow will be part of the school.

Dr. Stu Jacobson will again offer his Beekeeping as a Business session and lead a related panel discussion, "Beekeeping as a Business – different paths". Adony Melathopoulos's topics will be announced after the first of the year, but I guarantee everyone will enjoy his talks. I met Adony at a meeting in Canada a few years ago. Lately he has been wintering in Chicago and will be coming farther south to join us again as he did last year. Jim Garrison of Creative Candles will be back with us to conduct a beeswax candle making class and will have candles on display (and for sale) in the vendor's area.

Dr. Tom Webster once again will conduct the beginner's track of classes for the new or novice beekeeper! If you are a new beekeeper, or a beekeeper-2-bee, the beginning track of classes is where you want to be. Pre-registration is suggested; download the pre-registration form at the State Apiarist's Web page (see link at bottom of newsletter).

We'll have a more complete class list after the first of the year. Watch my Web site.

Bowling Green Beekeeping School

The Allen County Beekeepers Association in Scottsville has hosted a beekeeping school in Bowling Green in early February for the last several years. This year, they have decided not to hold a winter school and are considering an alternative time of the year, perhaps in warmer weather when "hands-on" beekeeping instruction can be performed. Plans for a beekeeping school in the Bowling Green area will be announced at a later date.

Watch for more information on beekeeping schools!

More information on all of these schools, along with links to out-of-state schools in the region, is at my Web page.

Colony Collapse Disorder Update

This is a brief update on Colony Collapse Disorder - brief because there is not much new to report since the June newsletter. (You can view what was written in that June issue of the BUZZ by going to my Web page; it is archived there. See the link at the bottom of this newsletter.) Most of the discussion recently has centered on there being a number of factors involved in CCD (as opposed to a single cause), on the presence of viruses in hives lost to CCD, and on speculation about pesticide involvement in these losses. None of this is "new".

Let me preface this article with my opinion that CCD does not appear to have occurred in Kentucky last year, and it does not appear to be occurring here this winter either. CCD seems to be a problem primarily of beekeepers with large migratory operations that make multiple stops with their bees each year. Most of the beekeepers affected own thousands of hives and move them long distances. At this point in time, no Kentucky beekeeper moves hives to this degree, and no out-of-state beekeeper in this category makes stops in Kentucky. Many beekeepers in Kentucky did suffer heavy colony losses last year, but these losses appear to be more related to the poor nectar flow in 2007 than to unexplained causes like CCD. But could this problem start to affect smaller beekeeping operations here? Possibly, but we don't know. The possibility is enough to make beekeepers very nervous.

Hives weakened by multiple factors

As honeybee scientists continue to point out, no single cause of last year's colony collapses has been isolated, but several factors may be involved in combination. These are the focus of ongoing research and include: stress (such as stress from repeated movement of hives), nutritional issues involving feeding of pollen substitutes and of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) as a substitute for honey, and pesticide issues. There is also the fact that multiple disease agents and mites have been found in bee samples taken from hives showing evidence of CCD last spring. None of these diseases alone is thought to be the cause of CCD, but could hives weakened by some of the factors mentioned above succumb to diseases or pests that would not normally be lethal? Possibly, but we don't know.

There is still much discussion of viruses

Samples taken from hives lost last year to CCD show the presence of multiple viruses, but again, there is no evidence that any single virus is the culprit, or that any of those viruses caused the loss of the colonies. There was much discussion in the fall about a "new" (to the U.S.) virus, Israeli Acute Paralysis Virus (IAPV) (<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070906140803.htm>), and its possible connection to CCD. IAPV was initially of great interest to researchers because of its presence in a majority of collapsed hives classified as CCD, and because of its apparently recent appearance in the U.S. It had been reported previously in Israel and Australia, and there was speculation that the U.S. source of IAPV might be packages of bees imported from Australia during the last couple of years, since the discovery of the IAP virus appeared to coincide closely with the start of importation of packages from Australia in 2005. However, more recent research conducted at the USDA Bee Lab in Beltsville, Md. (<http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/pr/2007/071119.htm>), has determined that the IAP virus has been in the United States since at least 2002 and thus predates the movement of bees from Australia and also the appearance of CCD. This research consisted of testing stored honeybee samples, collected between 2002 and 2007, for the presence of the IAP virus. The virus was present in a number of these samples, including those as far back as 2002. This discovery indicates that Australian package bee shipments were not the initial source of IAPV in the United States, but it does not negate the significance of the presence of IAPV in hives that have collapsed. More research is needed to determine the prevalence of this virus in hives throughout the United States and its possible role in hives beset by other problems. Could this virus or other viruses play a partial role in the collapsed hives? Possibly – but we don't know. Could hives weakened by multiple causes allow viruses to thrive? Again – possibly, but we don't know. There is evidence of some connection between IAPV and CCD, but not nearly enough to identify it, or any other virus, as the cause.

Pesticide issues

Many beekeepers, including some who lost hives last fall and winter to Colony Collapse Disorder, feel that a pesticide used by growers to prevent insect damage to their crops, specifically a class of pesticides called neonicotinoids, are the culprit or at least a major factor in the collapse of their hives. But again, so far no direct link can be drawn between pesticides and last year's colony losses. There is also the issue of the legally registered products, which are also pesticides, used by beekeepers to control varroa mites in our hives. Could these products have a role as well? Again – possibly, but we don't know.

Is CCD happening again?

So far (that is, in mid-December 2007), it does not appear to be. By mid-December 2006, many of the CCD losses were occurring or had already taken place. I am hearing that some of the beekeepers who were hit last year, specifically migratory beekeepers with hives in Florida, have hives that "aren't doing well" at this time. Is this a precursor of bad things to come? I do not know. Stay tuned and we'll find out. What does it mean if these losses occur again? What does it mean if they do not recur? Again – I do not know. So far research has provided no answers - just tantalizing hints and tentative theories, most of which give rise to more questions. Again, stay tuned.

Beekeeping movies

In addition to a LOT of press coverage due to CCD this year, honeybees are in movie theaters as well. "The Bee Movie", an animated children's film, hit the big screen in November and has given a lot of publicity to honeybees. I have to keep in mind that this is a cartoon movie, made for kids, and meant to be silly. I'm going to admit that I've not seen it, and that the film has brought a lot of positive attention to honeybees (positive as compared to all the doom and gloom in the press about CCD and dead bees.) But I can't get past the fact that the film portrays worker bees as male and is full of other misinformation. I suppose one should not expect science from Hollywood, but this basic divergence from biology prevents me from getting too excited about "The Bee Movie." For comments on the inaccuracies in the film, you may be interested in this column that appeared in the New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/09/opinion/09brackney.html>. However, the movie has spawned some accurate spin-off information. A co-worker showed me a package of Trix yogurt featuring a promotion for the film along with factoids (e.g. "Honeybees' wings stroke 11,400 times per minute"), which appear to be accurate, printed inside the container's foil cover.

Pollen Nation

A recently produced film about beekeeping that I am very interested in is a documentary entitled "Pollen Nation". "Pollen Nation" is about migratory beekeepers and their travels across the country with their hives and bees providing pollination to the country's vegetable and fruit industry. I have not seen this film either, but it is not from lack of interest; I just have not had the opportunity yet. I've spoken with one of the filmmakers of "Pollen Nation" about acquiring copies to show in Kentucky at upcoming meetings and conferences, and that will happen. Plans are underway for DVD sales and for licensing for viewings at large meetings, and the pricing sounds reasonable. You can go to the "Pollen Nation" Web site to learn more about the documentary, and to view a trailer: (<http://www.pollennationthemovie.com/>). There is also a site there for upcoming showings, though the current listings are only for locations in the west. The Web site will soon have information on DVD purchasing and viewing licenses and, as the "buzz" about the film spreads, maybe some showings closer to home.

On the small screen

As we all know, CCD has created a frenzy in the media. My phone and those of my colleagues rang constantly this spring and summer. Much of what has been written was not very accurate, partly because this is not a simple story and cannot be told in a few short paragraphs or sound bites. But there has been some accurate, thoughtful reporting both in the print media and on television. One of the very nice television stories produced was this year's season premier of Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) natural history series "Nature," in an episode entitled "Silence of the Bees". Though this episode aired at the end of October, I suspect it may be repeated later in the season. Or you can go to "Nature's" Web site and view an excerpt from the show in the form of a podcast, along with a lot of information and some nice photography. This is much more than just a dead bees from CCD story. Go to: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/bees/update.html>.

In print from the University of Kentucky

A nice print article was written right here in Kentucky by Aimee Nielson of the UK College of Agriculture's Agricultural Communications News and Information Service. Though the article was written in May, it is not a dated article. You can read it at: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/news/2007/may/honeybeedecline.htm>.

To have THE BUZZ! sent directly to you!

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Keep those smokers lit and your bee veils on!

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