

Honeybees & Drought

With high temperatures and lack of rainfall we can physically see the effects on the flora and fauna around us. Leaves are drying up and falling, crops are withering and the ground cracks.

When we enter a dearth, the availability of nectar producing plants becomes limited also and the insects which rely on these plants begin to suffer. With a limited nectar supply the insect's attention will shift to whatever is available around them. One of the things seen during a period of dearth is opportunistic feeding. Hummingbird feeders can become attractive, as well as cans of soda with any residual sweetness left in them.

This generally has the unwanted effect of bringing people into close contact with stinging insects. As a rule, when honeybees are foraging they are not in a defensive mode. It is when we don't notice them that we may accidentally pinch one and receive a sting. One should also be mindful when drinking a soda outside so as to not accidentally sip up a honeybee or wasp.

What can be done for non-beekeepers?

If bees and wasps become a problem around your home you may want to take down your hummingbird feeders for a couple of days. The insects may forget about them and seek other sources. Tie up all garbage bags and remove food items from outside that may be attractive. Another way to minimize contact is to use a repellent such as OFF or Cutters. Generally the ones with the higher amount of the chemical DEET are the most effective. These repellents may be sprayed on areas that the bees and wasps are frequenting. Try to avoid spraying these directly on honeybees.

Additionally, you could help the bees out by mixing some sugar water up at a ratio of 1-1 by weight, and placing it in a shallow pan and setting it up some distance away from human activity to give them a feeding opportunity. Remember they will need something to land on so they don't drown and are able to preen. Gravel works well for this. 1-1 can be easily mixed by taking a 1 gallon milk jug and adding 5# of sugar and topping off with hot tap water and shaking vigorously.

Another thing we may observe during a dearth is a robbing behavior among our own colonies and feral bees as well. Honeybees are notorious robbers and will rob neighboring colonies to the point of starvation. In addition, certain species of Wasps may be seen attacking honey bee colonies and eating bees as well as invading hives for their stored supplies.

What can beekeepers do?

If your hives are in close proximity of your neighbors you should consider setting up an open feeding station to help keep your bees close to home. As above, this can be done with shallow pans with gravel and 1-1 syrup or a variety of other methods. You should not set these up too close to your hives but at a distance of at least 100'. This will help to lessen the chance of starting a robbing frenzy. Entrances to your hives should be reduced so the bees can more easily defend them. In addition, the bees are using a lot of water right now to cool their hives and if you don't have a water source nearby you need to provide one for them. Adding a teaspoon of salt to a gallon of water may help to keep them out of your neighbor's swimming pools as well. If your neighbors complain about bees visiting their pools, you may want to offer the suggestion that if they hang a towel from the edge this will give the bees a place to land and should help to

concentrate them in one area. A bottle of honey for them (the homeowner) may also help to keep the peace.

Hopefully the drought will ease and we will see an increase in forage and things will return to normal soon.