

WHAT IS THE DOSE OF GIANT PUFF-BALL [*Calvatia gigantea*]

I was helping a friend. He was purchasing second-hand bee-kit, and bees were a new venture for him. I knew the warnings about this and about buying bees... shall we call the goods on offer an assortment.

In the corner of the shed on a shelf was what looked like a large old forgotten biscuit. It was grey, almost an inch thick by about four inches in diameter and light-weight. I did not know what it was until the old man told us "puff-ball, and you may as well take it along with everything else". In fact it was an old dried slice of a Giant puff-ball.

I had read Butler's amazing book on beekeeping in Tudor times "the Feminine Monarchy. 1603", the 'feminine' being an acknowledgement that a queen may lead a realm, after the example of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First. Previously it had been always a king in the worlds of both men and bees.

I knew from that book that puff-balls were known to subdue bees in those far off years. Fast-forward to 2005 when the bee inspector made an appointment to go through my bees, but it was well into September and I had already put the bees to bed for the winter. But yes we could have a look in. When he came I had already changed my mind about one hive that was strong and pretty irritable, he could go it alone without me....but then I remembered the puff-ball, and what is more I had been given a fresh one the previous year. It had taken a long while to dry out even in $\frac{3}{4}$ inch slices, and even after over a year it was still rubbery and flexible but it was dry.

I had tried once earlier in the season by putting a few sugar-cube sized lumps on the top of the dry grass I use in my smoker. It had had no effect, and I thought that perhaps it had not got hot enough for the narcotic essence to come out. This time I took a one inch strip of the 'biscuit' and lit it at both ends. It smoldered slowly helped by my blowing on it; I put it by itself into the smoker to keep it going and off we went to inspect the hive. The inspector was very interested too in this puff-ball business, it was a bit out of the ordinary. What is more we had met each other first several years earlier at the Tudor recreation at Kentwell Hall, Long Melford in Suffolk where I had bees in skeps.

I gave twenty puffs into the mouth of the hive, and then there was the mandatory academic pause before the opening up. "not many bees in here" was all he said. I was non-plussed because I knew this was a strong bunch of bees, but after removing four more frames we both peered in, and he was right, there were not many bees that we could see. They were all lying on their backs three inches deep on the floor. We did not have much to say to one another, but it was impressive how the inspection continued calmly, methodically but naturally very quietly.

I thought 'that's it, I've killed the lot', but after five minutes there was a bit more activity in the hive, and by the time we got the roof back on I was glad to get away from the increasing fury. I know the queen should be changed, but it was too late in the year and, what is more, that would not have been a curiosity to match the puff-ball experiment.

Most of us who have kept bees for some years have been in a spot of trouble [not necessarily with our own stock] and in situations where extermination of angry bees is not possible for one reason or another. The puff-ball may be the handy narcotic we need in such situations.

I may by a fluke have got the dose almost right, but I did have long minutes of silent panic. The question remains...'. what is the dose of puff-ball'?

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