

HONEY BEE COLONY WINTER SURVIVAL RATE GREATLY IMPROVES

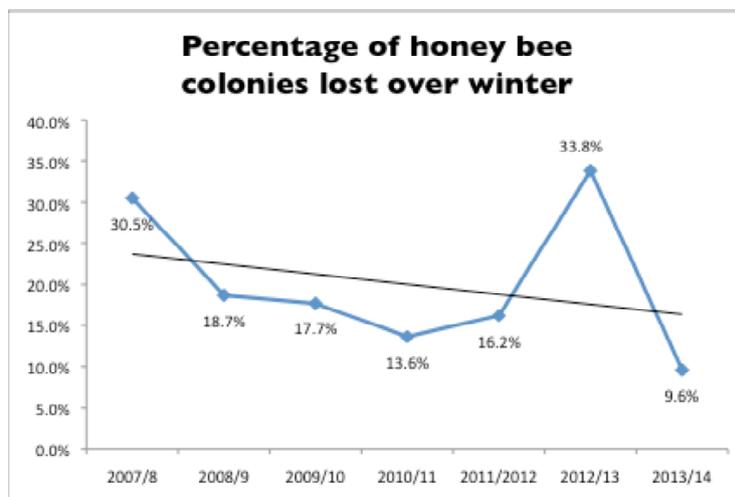
The 2013/14 winter was kinder to bees but losses at 10 percent were still double what they should be

The results of the British Beekeepers Association (BBKA) winter survival survey published today show that the honey bee colony survival rate in England over this last winter has improved greatly. Overall, honey bee colony losses were one in ten compared with losses of more than one in three over the bad winter of 2012/2013.

The BBKA survey of colony survival is conducted annually amongst its members and measures the numbers of their colonies that survive the winter between 1 October and 31 March the following year. The current data gathered over the last seven winters shows how survival rates have fluctuated.

The weather of the 2013/14 winter was much less severe than the previous year which no doubt will have helped more colonies to survive. However, whilst important, the weather is but one of several factors which interact in varying degrees to influence the ability of honey bee colonies to survive this testing period.

All regions in England showed improved survival rates, with a national average of 9.6 colonies in every 100 being lost between 1 October 2013 and 31 March 2014 compared with 33.8 colonies in every 100 over the same period in the winter of 2012/2013.



More....



Although much lower than in previous years, a loss of 9.6 percent of colonies is still too high. Such levels of loss would be considered intolerable in the national dairy herd or poultry flocks, for example. An urgent need remains to help honey bees cope with the parasitic mite Varroa and the honey bee viruses associated with it. Research is still needed to find practical solutions to deal with Varroa.

Other than the better weather, the threats to the honey bee remained largely undiminished. Huge efforts are being made by local beekeeping associations in the training, education and improvement of the skills of beekeepers supported by the bee inspectorate and the limited funds provided under the Government's Healthy Bee Plan. Corporate sponsors and members of the public are also contributing to this work.

Dr David Aston, BBKA President, said: "The results from this year's survey are encouraging but must be seen in the context of longer term trends. It is clear that beekeepers are doing their utmost to sustain and increase honey bee colonies through their skilled husbandry."

Despite the colony losses reported since 2007/8, there has been an upward trend in the total number of honey bee colonies being managed by members of the BBKA. BBKA membership has more than doubled since 2007, when there were around 11,000 members, to around 24,000 today and consequently the number of colonies is increasing.

Forage availability remains a problem but there are hopes that the National Pollinators Strategy will contribute in this area over time. Interestingly this survey was made during the period in which honey bees were still exposed to crops which had been treated with neonicotinoid crop protection products prior to the imposition of the moratorium on their use. Whilst still wishing to see further research on the actual effect of neonicotinoids on honey bees in the field the association also has concerns about the wider use of crop sprays that the ban on neonicotinoids will oblige farmers to employ.

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Notes to editors.....

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Results: Winter losses of honey bee colonies in England over the last seven years

Winter	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/2012	2012/13	2013/14
% lost	30.5%	18.7%	17.7%	13.6%	16.2%	33.8%	9.6%

Winter losses of honey bee colonies by region in England in the years 2012/13 and 2013/14

Region England	% loss Winter 2012/2013	% loss Winter 2013/2014
Eastern	29.8	7.9
North East	38.2	10.9
Northern	46.4	9.6
South East	32.4	15.0
South West	52.9	8.6
Southern	26.9	12.3
Western	28.3	6.8

Importance of winter losses of honey bees

The honey bee is the only bee to maintain a colony throughout the winter reducing its colony size in autumn and relying on its stores of honey to last it through the winter months when it is too cold for foraging or there is no forage available. The loss of honey bee colonies impacts the available pollination resources as well as reducing honey crops, so it is essential that beekeepers rebuild stocks, which is done by 'splitting' colonies and building-up honey bee numbers back up to strength over the season. So if for example, a beekeeper takes 10 hives into the winter but loses two colonies by the spring, a further two colonies must be 'split' to get back up to 10 colonies by the end of the season. The net effect being that the beekeeper has effectively only six hives running at full strength during the season. Experienced beekeepers keeping bees in good conditions are able to increase colony numbers highlighting the importance of beekeepers in managing and growing honey bee colony numbers.

Honey bee survival

In winter, worker bees can live for up to five or six months. But in the summer, worker bees only live for around six weeks having to work much harder, foraging. Honey bee queens live for three to four years but cannot survive without worker bees. In other species of bees or wasps only the queen survives by hibernating through the winter months.

Survey methodology and results

The overwinter survival of honey bee colonies is a composite measure of their fitness and the effect of various factors such as colony nutrition and the skill and experience of the beekeeper.

Method

Survey forms were posted to 2,500 randomly selected BBKA Registered Members who were requested to complete it with data over the period 1 October 2013 to 31 March 2014 and return to the BBKA.

Results

A total of 820 forms were returned with data from 754 returns used in the analysis. The difference in the numbers was mainly due to the respondent not having kept any bees during the survey period.

Regions

The regions correspond with the NBU bee inspectorate regions.

About The BBKA

With around 24,000 members, the British Beekeepers Association (BBKA) is the leading organisation supporting honey bees and beekeepers within the UK. It aims to promote and further the craft of beekeeping and to advance the education of the public in the importance of bees in the environment.

www.bbka.org.uk