



Collecting a Swarm

Beekeepers are frequently asked to remove bee swarms and this leaflet advises on how such a request may be handled, but bear in mind there is no standard situation, they should all be treated individually.

Before attempting to collect swarms it is advisable to work closely with an experienced beekeeper so you can gain experience of taking swarms in different circumstances.

There are several places where a beekeeper can be put on a list for collecting swarms. Before doing so please make sure you are prepared to collect them throughout the season, not just taking enough swarms to satisfy your own needs, then not bothering about other requests. This is annoying to those who may contact you as they often have a problem they need dealt with quickly and efficiently. It also puts pressure on responsible beekeepers who are prepared to collect them, often when they have no need for them.

You should have the ability and knowledge to collect swarms wherever they are, or to advise how they should be dealt with if too difficult or dangerous to take. If not, it would be advisable to seek help from an experienced beekeeper.

In the text below "skep" should be taken to mean whatever is used to collect the swarm. Usual substitutes could be a wooden or cardboard box.

Preparation

It is likely you will receive a call because you are on a list, are known as someone who is prepared to collect swarms or as a local beekeeper. Keep all the equipment you are likely to need handy so you can respond to the call quickly.

You are likely to be dealing with non-beekeepers who may know very little about honey bees or the possible alternatives. They may be calm and responsive to suggestions of what they can do until you arrive, or they may be in a panic in which case they may not give you the right information or may not behave in a rational way. To be able to deal with the call efficiently you will need to be calm and gather as much information as you can.

Careful questioning often reveals that the call is not for a swarm of honey bees at all.

It makes sense to fully understand the swarming process and how bees will react to different circumstances. This will help you take swarms with minimal problems. Study the alternatives to honey bees, their life cycles and identification. "Swarm calls" are often bumblebees, solitary bees, wasps, hornets or hover flies.

You won't be able to give much advice if you know nothing about them. A web-search will give you a lot of information and it might be possible to make a list of websites you can suggest the caller visits.

Do this in the early spring every year in case websites change, as they often do. It may be helpful for local BKAs to have a page on their websites to help the general public to deal with swarms.

Initial Contact

Many callers may have never experienced a swarm of bees before, they may panic and not give you the correct information. Gain enough information to be sure you are dealing with a swarm of honey bees and you have a reasonable chance of success. In order to do this you may need to ask the following:-

- The address/location and postcode of the swarm and the

'phone number of the owner/occupier. This may avoid you dealing with a swarm that is a long way away. If so then try to give the name of a more local beekeeper.

- How big is the swarm? The description of the size of the cluster (e.g. football, tennis ball, golf ball) will be useful. Asking what size it is often results in an answer of 'massive' or 'huge' which isn't helpful. Remember it is only honey bees that swarm.
- What is the height and position of the cluster? Again, a description is useful (e.g. door, bedroom window etc).
- Will a ladder be necessary and available? If the 'swarm' is in the ground it is likely to be bumblebees, solitary bees or wasps.
- How long has the clustered swarm been there?
- Have the bees already entered somewhere like a roof, chimney or wall? If so, how long have they been there? If more than a few hours they may be very difficult to remove. Chimneys are often very difficult and buildings may need partial dismantling, so it may be worth mentioning to the caller so it doesn't come as a surprise to them later.

Very often early season calls are bumblebees when queens are looking for somewhere to nest and later in the season they are often wasps where the nest numbers have built up and there is a greater need for carbohydrate.

If you are satisfied they are honey bees then give your mobile number (if available) to the caller and ask them to contact you if the swarm departs before you get there.

Responsibility

There is no legal obligation on a beekeeper to respond to a swarm call but it is an opportunity to perform a service to the community and improve the reputation, awareness and understanding of bees and beekeeping, while at the same time increasing one's own colony numbers.

If the initial enquiries leave you in doubt, you might arrange, without obligation, to inspect the swarm on site and to give advice. This might lead to a recommendation that the swarm should be destroyed by a Pest Control Officer or a licensed contractor. This is not the preferred option, but may be the only sensible one where safety may be an issue.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD YOU AGREE TO ATTEMPT SOMETHING FOR WHICH YOU ARE NOT QUALIFIED, SKILLED, EQUIPPED AND INSURED.

(e.g. demolition, building work, poisoning, tree-felling etc.).

Preparation

Before attending to remove a swarm:-

- Explain what you expect to happen and emphasise that whilst every care and skill will be exercised you cannot guarantee a successful outcome.
- Agree a time to attend.
- Confirm any costs/charges that collection will incur, but check insurance conditions first as you may not be covered if you make a charge above expenses.
- Ask that the immediate area be cleared of people prior to your arrival.
- If you are going to need help, get another beekeeper to assist.
- Only persons insured for Third Party Liability, (either through BBKA or otherwise) should take part in the collection.

- Make sure you have ALL the equipment you are likely to need (skep or swarm box, large sheet, string, smoker, hive tool, smoker fuel, matches, protective clothing, queen cage, secateurs, saw, mobile telephone, etc.).
- Ask the caller to 'phone you if the swarm leaves before you get there. This is quite possible, especially between 10am and 4pm. They may cluster for a few minutes or can stay there and build a nest in the open.

Safety

On arrival assess the situation and decide if you are capable of removing the swarm without damage to property or people. If not then you should seek help from a more experienced beekeeper. It is easy to overlook a possible hazard when being helpful and trying to remove what others see as a danger.

A skep is much heavier when it suddenly has a swarm of bees drop into it. This may cause you to lose balance if standing on a ladder.

If driving home make sure the bees are secure. The odd bee is to be expected and will be more concerned at getting out than stinging you. If a driver is frightened of being stung it could cause a bad accident.

Collection

Once you approach a swarm with the intention of collection and removal it becomes your property and you have responsibility to protect bystanders.

- Advise the closure of all nearby windows and doors (including vehicles).
- Wearing protective clothing, approach the swarm, smoke it gently and shake/brush/detach it from its position directly into the skep if possible, or on to a large sheet laid on the ground below.
- Bees prefer to move upwards, so if the swarm is in a hedge or similar place put a skep above it and gently smoke the bees into it from underneath. If you can get some bees into the skep they should start fanning and may call the rest in.
- Bees will go into a skep much more readily if it has had bees in before. If it hasn't then imprison the first swarm for several hours until they build a little wax. This should help make it more attractive to the bees in future.
- If it is difficult to get a swarm into a skep then lay a comb that has had brood in as close as you can to the bees. This should attract some of the bees onto the comb which can be shaken into the skep. This can be repeated and it may be possible to place the skep close enough for the fanning bees to call the others into it.
- If possible it is always advisable to cage the queen. This will make collection easier and may prevent absconding. It is quite common when there are virgin queens in a swarm for there to be several.
- Place the skep on the sheet, raised at one side by about 50-100 mm and leave until the remaining bees in the cluster and the flying scout bees have followed the queen into the skep. This might well be later in the day or early evening and could require another visit.
- Tie the sheet over the skep to make it bee-tight and remove to your vehicle.
- Make every effort to ensure all bees are captured; do not remove the skep too early in the evening.

- Bees will suffocate quite quickly, so make sure they have ventilation and are not sealed in.
- Leave your 'phone number in case of unexpected problems.

Disposal and hiving

In most cases there will be a ready taker for a swarm, either as a new colony or as reinforcement for a weak one. If two swarms are taken at the same time and only one colony is required they can be hived together. However, when hiving swarms certain precautions should be observed and although in general swarms are quite healthy there is a chance a swarm could have come from a colony infected with foul brood. For that reason the following is advisable:-

- Hive it on foundation, not on comb.
- Don't feed it for at least 4 days and only then if it needs it. There is often no need to feed at all.
- If hived near other bees then isolate it by as much distance as you can. If space is tight hive it as far away as possible, facing the entrance in the opposite direction to the nearest hive.
- Check for both foul broods AFB and EFB after 3 weeks and again a few weeks later. If clear then gradually move to the intended destination where it can be treated the same as other colonies.

If the swarm came from a colony infected with foul brood it may have brought infected honey with it. Hiving on foundation will ensure this honey is used to make wax to draw the foundation out instead of storing it in comb that might continue the infection. In these circumstances it may seem unnecessary to isolate it, but it is an additional precaution.

If the new colony shows any undesirable characteristics then re-queen from a colony with good characteristics.

Manage all colonies in your apiary responsibly to reduce the incidence of swarming and so reduce the need for future swarm collection by yourself or someone else (see the BBKA Advisory leaflet L003 "Swarm Control for the beginner").

General points:

This leaflet is one of a series intended to help beekeepers and non-beekeepers. If you believe the contents of this leaflet are relevant to you, please seek further advice from an experienced beekeeper or your tutor.

Information is updated regularly – please check with the BBKA web site at: www.bbka.org.uk – for the latest information.

This leaflet supersedes 'Collecting a Swarm' (B4 2009 4th edition)

Note: The same information is published in our leaflet L004 available from the BBKA.

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