

A Swarm in October?!!!

“Have you seen the swarm of bees in the hedge down Stoney Lane?” This was the question directed at me by a couple of neighbours – simply because they know I’m an amateur beekeeper. I was highly sceptical – a swarm in October – what nonsense, the bees have got far more sense than that! A little while later Colin, a fellow beekeeper in the village, sent me a photo – wow, whilst certainly not a recent swarm, here was a very strong colony of bees living in the hedge.



The very clean wax seemed to indicate that a swarm had settled there earlier in the year, and used the benefits of a warm and dry summer to simply build their new colony right where they had first landed. It was only as we got towards late October and the leaves started to fall in the thick hedgerow that had anyone noticed their presence.

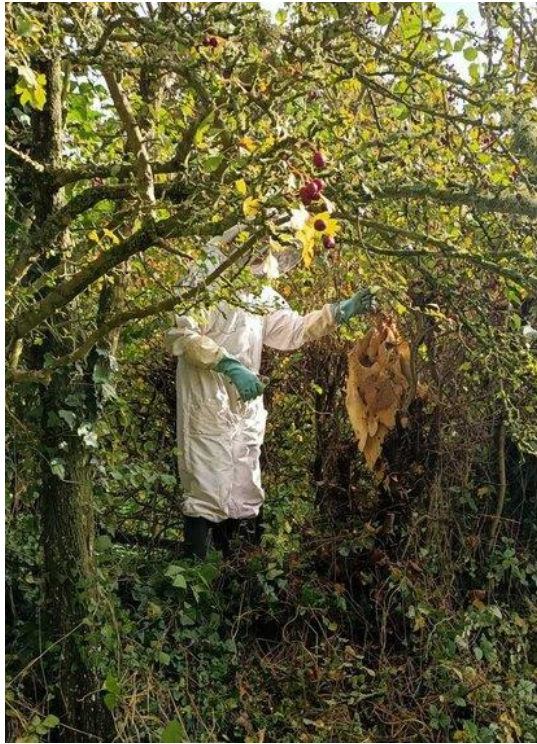
The question was – what was the best way to help them - given the reducing temperatures, the increasing rainfall, and the disappearance of their weather protection as the leaves fell away more rapidly? Their lovely calm temperament meant that a close, un-beesuited, inspection was possible and revealed an amazing structure built around one central trunk of the bush but with wax bracing structures

built out from the sides to steady the structure. The major challenge was that the length of their comb was approaching one metre – this certainly couldn't be solved by the traditional comb by comb removals into brood frames.

With the agreement of the very co-operative house owner we retired to seek overnight inspiration. Whilst I have seen one swarm survive several winters under the eaves of a house – mainly sheltered from the rain but still out in the cold and damp - it seemed highly unlikely that this colony could survive the ravages of a British winter on the bare branches of a bush. Could we simply build some sort of shelter above and around them to get them through the winter, and then migrate them into a hive once their numbers had reduced significantly? Previous experience had taught me that moving feral bees by cutting out one piece of comb after another would result in winter honey stores spilling out everywhere, resulting in a ghastly sticky mess of honey and bees, and cause the bees such huge stress that it could seriously endanger their survival. In the meantime the number of contacts coming in from concerned villagers increased significantly as more and more people were able to see this lovely colony in the bushes. It's very encouraging that so many members of the public are now aware of, and concerned about, our bees.

A return visit to the site provided the welcome confirmation that the comb seemed to be built around one central trunk of the bush with the wax outriggers steadying the structure connecting to nearby branches. We decided that, *perhaps*, we could cut off the wax outriggers, then cut through the base of the main supporting trunk, lift the whole structure in one piece, and put it inside empty brood boxes. A crude measurement of the length of the comb showed that four (!!) brood boxes would be required. I levelled a hive-stand in the immediate proximity whilst Phil headed off to fetch empty brood boxes. The four brood boxes were firmly attached to each other by brackets to provide the structural strength required.

Now the important stages began. Phil cut his way into the centre of the hedgerow to get close to the colony and then very patiently and carefully started cutting the wax outriggers and any side branches that appeared to be attached.



Then with Phil holding the top of the trunk, I cut through the base and, luckily, the whole structure stayed in one piece. Phil then passed the complete colony of bemused bees out of the hedgerow to me as a single item.



A further stroke of luck meant that the colony could be fitted into the empty brood chambers without any trimming. Then it was simply a matter of lowering the colony into their new home, with the trunk base resting on the hive floor, and adding empty frames in the top box to provide the support to keep the whole structure as vertical as when removed from the bushes.



The four brood box structure was left close beside the hedgerow so that foraging bees could find their new home when they returned. Then after a few days we moved the complete colony down the hill to Phil's garden and a reward of sugar solution to welcome them to their new apiary!

Despite this rude and major disruption to their home and lives, the bees stayed remarkably calm throughout and so hopefully will prove a good tempered and strong colony. So now the hope is that their chances of surviving the winter have been dramatically improved and in the Spring they can be persuaded to migrate onto conventional frames of new wax.

The whole exercise had gone far more smoothly than initially feared and certainly with far less disruption to the bees than transferring them to a hive comb by comb. Phil and I returned to our homes feeling very pleased about the satisfaction - and luck – in a good day's work!

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