

Swansea & District Beekeepers Gwenynwyr Abertawe a'r Cylch Newsletter

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Editor: D. Salkilld

THE ASIAN HORNET. By David O'Carroll

A few years ago the threat of an alien invasion seemed imminent. *Vespa velutina* was ravaging the French countryside sending beekeepers into a frenzy; and then, Asian Hornets were found on Jersey - British territory!



It seems that the natural barrier of the English Channel has provided some protection against the spread of this non-native species to the UK mainland and I suspect that the reduction in travel due to Covid has also had a dampening effect on the proliferation into our apiaries. But these hornets seem adept at hitchhiking on trucks and holiday-makers' cars. So, what does 2022 hold in store for us?

The Society has taken the threat of the Asian Hornet seriously and we were one of the first beekeeping organisations to set up an Asian Hornet Action Team. The Asian Hornet is an aggressive predator of many beneficial insects including honeybees and it was the danger to bees that instilled our realisation of the need for vigilance.

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The spread of the Asian Hornet has been dramatic across Europe. It has been estimated that the rate at which it has spread is about 60-100km a year. It is right to call it an invasive species and it is now present in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium and Switzerland. Brexit will not halt their spread and islands such as Majorca and Jersey have discovered nests on their shores.

The National Bee Unit, a part of the Government's Animal & Plant Health Agency, has been circumspect about whether any colonies of Asian Hornet have been able to establish themselves in the UK. The first confirmed sighting was in September 2016 but none in Wales...yet.

The effect on beekeeping

Perhaps I should say a little about the effect of the Asian Hornet on honey bees for those who are new to the craft of beekeeping.

The Asian Hornet is a smaller insect than the hornets native to Britain. They appear to be a more aggressive predator than their European cousins. They have the potential to decimate an individual honey bee colony and overcome the bees' natural defensive behaviours. In time, our bees may develop effective defensive strategies but this may take a long time and I have not heard of any change of behaviour being recorded in Europe. Our bees must therefore rely on us to defend them - pitchforks at the ready its time for Dad's Army. But what's this I've just read in *Welsh Beekeeper* - European Hornet have been seen predated on their Asian foes.

We have much more information now about Asian Hornets than did beekeepers in Europe back in 2004 when the insect was first recorded in Southern France. We can therefore learn from their experience. The National Bee Unit has been in the forefront of collating this experience along with the UK Non-Native Species Secretariat. We have a good understanding of the lifecycle - how Queens rather than colonies overwinter - and their feeding behaviour.

Asian Hornets predate on honeybees by hawking in front of beehives, catching single bees 'on the wing'. They then fly to a nearby place where they butcher their prey, removing the head, wings and legs before taking the thorax and abdomen back to their nests to feed their developing brood.

The 'experts' estimate that in the UK the first brood of worker hornets will emerge between April and May; so perhaps we won't see this predating behaviour before this time of year.

Worse is to come. After the initial brood has emerged in the nest made by the hornet Queen, a larger nest is built. This will soon be full of voracious foragers intent on emptying the content of local beehives. The colony will not recover. Understanding the life-cycle and behaviour of *Vespa velutina* helps us to understand what action we can take to resist the invasion and the timing of our action. I will cover this in next month's issue.

ED: My thanks to David for this timely article, we look forward to his follow-up article in the next newsletter.

Spring Inspections

The time for spring inspections will soon be with us and, hopefully, our colonies will have come through the winter safely. A few questions always crop up such as "**when shall we inspect**" and "**what are we looking for**".

The **when** is easy, when it is warm enough to open the hive without chilling / damaging the brood, i.e. when the temperature is such that you can safely go out in shirtsleeves, somewhere above 12°C. It varies from year to year and largely depends on the weather but is usually sometime in March. So saying, in the past I have done some inspections in April. Do not be tempted to open the hives in cold weather, wait until it is warm enough.

What are we looking for? Primarily a healthy colony, i.e., one which has a laying queen, patches of healthy worker brood, these may be large or small but don't worry if they are small. Also look for pollen stores around the brood, supplies of capped honey and foragers flying with a purpose. If feeding is necessary, use either a thin sugar syrup or a commercial feed such as Ambrosia syrup. There are a lot of brands available on the market.

I also take the opportunity to do some clean-up in the hive, to change the floor and crown board, to remove any old, blackened combs and replace them with either clean drawn comb or new foundation. A good rule of thumb is to replace about one third of the brood chamber frames each year.

Let's hope that your colonies have survived and are healthy. D.S.

An email from Rod & Max

Hi David,

We both hope you have recovered from your recent health problems.

Speaking to my son in New Zealand who now keeps bees, I was interested to hear that he has been 'treating' his hives with Rhubarb leaves which I now understand contains Oxalic acid, this was all very new to me but I'm sure someone with your greater experience will have heard of this treatment and I would be interested if anyone in the club has used this treatment.

Sounds like an article for the next newsletter!! (I have read a bit about it on the internet but would be interested what others have to say.)

Keep well. Rod and Max Sewter

ED. My thanks to Rod & Max for the email, yes, rhubarb leaves do contain oxalic acid but I had never heard of them being used directly on a beehive. Many of today's medicines are derived from plant origins, perhaps the best known is aspirin, (salicylic acid) originally derived from the bark of the willow tree.

However, the problem using source plant material is that the dosage is an unknown factor, whereas the manufactured chemical alternatives have been thoroughly tested for the most effective dosage. With rhubarb leaves, too little would probably be ineffective whilst too much might do harm to the colony. I'll stick to using the commercial miticides! D.S.

Honey as a Medicine

An article in the Daily Telegraph on December 21st reminded me that honey has been in use as a medicine to treat wounds for thousands of years. With a sub-title of "Old medical practices still relevant today", the article described some of the uses of today's medical honey.

As we know, honey has been used for centuries, up until the time that modern antibiotics became widely available in the mid twentieth century. Those new antibiotics were the panacea of all diseases and worked superbly until bacteria developed resistance to them. At that point, medical people looked at a range of alternatives and old-fashioned honey dressings were again put forward as an answer.

During a talk I was giving to a local Ladies Group many years ago, I mentioned this and one of the elderly ladies, a retired nurse, who had trained at the old Swansea Hospital on St. Helen's Road, told us of her experience in the 1950s, treating wounds with honey dressings.

Nowadays the dressings are most likely to be based on manuka honey and are free from contaminants and organic matter, sterilised using gamma rays and are manufactured under strict production and storage standards. They are available in pharmacies but the advice given in the article is to talk to your GP first.

The article advises against using 'table honey' which may be contaminated with pollen or microbial spores. Nevertheless, members of my family have used honey from my colonies with great effect, just as it has for thousands of years. I would, however, be very cautious about using shop-bought honey, after all, you don't know where it comes from or what it contains.

In about 2014, I attended a lecture on the use of Medicinal Honey at one of the Midland & Southwestern Beekeeping Conferences. The lecture was given by a representative of 'Advance Medical' who are manufacturers of Actibalm, a product comprising manuka honey and Vaseline. After the lecture they were handing out small (10 g) sample tubes so I picked one up out of curiosity and for future use at home. It is now well past its use by date and, touch wood, we haven't had an injury to try it on, though I am sure it would have worked well. Items like this can also be bought at local pharmacies. D. S.

Midland & South Western Counties Convention.

For the benefit of new members, I should mention that the MSWCC is an association of beekeeping societies, set up some time in the 1940s, to better educate people in the craft. In recent years it's nine member associations took turns in running an annual conference. Swansea & District ran them in 1985, 1994, 2003, 2010 and 2016. Lately the WBKA, BBKA and National Honey Show all have eclipsed the standards set by MSWCC and many of the other nine societies have dropped out.

Consequently, there is now a proposal to wind up the MSWCC and this is being put to the remaining associates. More news on this at a later date.

"When Bees were Bees" by Tom Davies.

In the 1930 issue of "Gleanings in Bee Culture" I came across a report on pollination in general, along with a complaint re price-cutting of the pollination charges to fruit growers.

It appears that price-cutting by some of the beekeepers for the service, resulted in a scale of charges from 3 dollars down to nil per colony and the majority were looking for a set price, as lots of beekeepers estimated a cost of two dollars per colony on moving to where they were needed.

The writer of the article, a Mr. Frank E. Todd, of Sacramento, California, wished it were possible to standardise the pollination services charges, giving local associations a target to aim for.

Mr. Todd reported that some beekeepers had pollinated three crops that year, using the same colonies, firstly almonds, then prunes in the valleys, and pears in the foothills.

He also reported that into California several tons of packaged bees were imported into the Northern California region, and had settled in well owing to ideal weather conditions, while on the disease front some 44,000 colonies had been inspected and only 1.2% found to be infected, and hopes for the future looking to be well founded.

Till next time, Tom.

Bay Magazine

It was good to see that one of our members, Marcus Treadwell, has had an article on bees published in the February issue of the Swansea's 'Bay Magazine'. He will be giving regular updates on his colonies and their happenings in future issues. Well Done Marcus.

Rare Bees Rediscovered in Oxfordshire

My brother sent me a cutting from the Waitrose magazine which said that fifty colonies of rare forest honey bees had recently been discovered in woodlands on the Blenheim Palace estate, Oxfordshire. They are thought to be descendants of Britain's indigenous honey bee and are said to be darker and smaller than those managed in today's hives.

Ed: This is good news and is a valuable addition to other native bee strains.

Beekeeping equipment for sale by David Salkilld

After my little scare with heart trouble at the end of last year, I have decided that, after 40 years of beekeeping, now is a good time to hang up my veil and smoker. Sadly, I'm just not fit enough to go on lifting 20 kg supers any longer.

Consequently, I have decided to sell off an amount of Langstroth hive equipment along with my remaining colony of honeybees which are housed in a Langstroth hive.

These Items will be offered at knockdown prices and include brood chambers, supers, hive stands, frames, roofs, crown boards, all in reasonable condition.

There is also an assortment of candle making equipment, mead making equipment, books and other miscellaneous bits and bobs such as bee escapes, feeders etc. and a quantity of good quality beeswax available too.

If you would like to see the items or want further information, please call me on 01792 205822.

David Salkilld

Californian Bees Stolen.

An article in the Times on 23rd Feb. reported that 1,036 beehives had been stolen from the Californian almond orchards over the past few weeks and a reward of \$10,000 had been offered by the Californian State Beekeepers Association for information leading to their recovery. Some beekeepers are reported to have installed cameras and GPS trackers in their hives to counter the thieves.

Beekeepers get an income from pollination services as well as from the honey produced. Farmers who use this service get greatly improved yields of whichever fruit or vegetable they are growing, be it beans, apples, plums, rape seed etc.

The Californian almond orchards are spread out over 400 miles and the industry is said to be worth about \$6 billion to the state. It is said to attract about 90% of American beehives during blossom time, trucked in from all over the U.S.A. and is the largest pollination event in the world. By comparison, our local beekeeping is on a slightly smaller scale. D. S.

“More About Bees” by Tom Davies

It's the 3rd February and I have had a couple of hours in the garden, not a bad day, the sun showing up now and again. I had some tree branches to cut up and this kept me warm.

It was too wet to do anything in the way of actual gardening though, that will have to wait for drier weather. This weekend I will be getting ready to sow some seeds. I sow seeds to start off the season on my living room windowsill and if frosty, I cover them with fleece and I have good results this way.

I hope that 2022 will be a better year than last, it was one of those years that if something could go wrong, it did! I suppose that most people have a year like that, something that we have to put up with.

With the prices of energy going up, it could have quite an effect on prices of equipment, in particular things like hives, and could put some people off coming into the craft.

Been quite a strange winter so far. Long damp periods, yet the grass is still growing, it looks as though I will need to start mowing fairly soon, possibly the warmth of a hive might have an effect on the grass around them too. With all the best wishes for 2022, and hopefully no losses.

Till next time, Tom Davies.

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Ed. My thanks to those who send me these interesting articles and newspaper cuttings.

The next newsletter is due out on 1st May 2022. Please let me have your articles / items by **15th Apr.** Many thanks.