

Thwarting the Swarm

Tuesday March 22, 2011

John Latson is the general contractor in my BNI networking group. While installing windows in the back of my house, he noticed that the bees were particularly excited around one hive. In fact, here was a tornado of bees! I was disappointed when I realized that they were swarming. Swarming is the process of colony reproduction. When a hive gets too large, and cramped in its nest or hive box it will split into two colonies. A new queen is produced, and the old queen will leave the hive and take with her half the colony. A close look at the front entrance showed bees marching out of the hive at high speed. They were literally pouring out of the hive! In 5 minutes, the hive was calm again.

The second step in swarming results in a thick ball of bees on a low hanging branch. The bees are laden with honey and very docile. A bee keeper can easily cut the branch and carry the bee-ball to a new hive and drop it in. I was not so lucky. My queen chose a branch 30 feet up. As usual, when in an apicultural quandary, I called Charles Heatherley. He is a long time member of the Wake County Bee Keepers Association, and I consider him a friend. He sold me my first beekeeper's suit and his advice has been very beneficial. Charles suggested that I reach as high as possible and tie a rope to the tree, then shake the queen loose. He also reminded me that my life was worth much more than a bee colony, so to keep the risk at a minimum. John helped me set up a 24-ft ladder at the base of the tree. I donned my beekeeper's suit. Once the rope was fastened, I gave one tug and the blasted knot let go. The second vigorous shake had no effect on the bee ball. So, I returned to the ladder with pole pruning shears. You can imagine my language as I tried to push the severed branch through the surrounding trees to the ground. After letting things settle, I found the branch completely bare. The swarm had returned to the hive, covering the front face an inch thick.

On my second call, Charles suggested I find the queen in the mass on the box. However, the mesh of face-shield proved too opaque to allow a clear view. They were calm so I chose to remove the bee suit. The greatest chance of getting stung is to the knees or hands, from the bees crawling in the grass. This is resolved with a foam kneeling pad. After several 10-minute scans over the throng, I abandoned the search. With time, the mass diminished. Charles explained on my third call, that the queen had probably been lost, so the swarmers returned home.

The next day I assembled parts of a honey-super to add to the box. There are already honey-supers on both my hives, added last fall, to give additional room for brood and honey to last until spring. After being fed sugar syrup all winter, my two colonies are strong and abundant. The colony in question had become too abundant. I put time and energy into maintaining my two colonies this winter. Last winter, I lost both my colonies to starvation.

My son Jacques has become skilled at stoking and lighting the smoker. Boy love to practice with fire! When I pried the top-feeder off the box, I broke comb that snaked between the frames and the feeder bottom, splitting it down the center. This exposed larva and pouring honey. The bees made this comb because there was no room left in the frames.

I hope adding the new honey-super will convince the colony to stay for the summer, ensuring a honey harvest. The two colonies from a split are small. They each need a full year to grow a population able to produce enough honey for both the winter store and the beekeeper's share.

I learned much from this experience, and must now learn the craft of honey extraction and canning. . . More to follow. My daughter Sophie thought of an alternate title: The Trumpet of The Swarm. She is frequently inspired by the musings of C. S. Louis. Best regards!



Approximate Swarm Location.



The Swarm, Seen from atop the Ladder.



A Close-up

June 19, 2011.

As prolog to this story, I must add that the same colony did swarm in the days that followed. Although I added a box to give more space, they chose to leave without my knowing. The remaining half colony will spend this season growing for next year. This leaves me with a single hive to harvest.



All Returning Home.



Torn Comb above the Frames. Note the White Larvae and, of course, the Honey