

PROTECT YOUR HIVES

Jennifer Berry

Over the years, I have encountered all types of beekeepers. And like people everywhere, beekeepers (for the most part) also fall into three categories. First you have the type “A” beekeeper. These are the ones who visit their colonies everyday and take temperature and humidity readings. They mix up the exact proportion of vitamins, minerals, sugars and amino acids into their pollen patties and syrup. Body measurements are taken each week to ensure the bees are getting a proper diet. There are landing lights laid out in their backyard to help guide the incoming foragers to their particular hive. Each queen, worker and drone is given a name. There are infrared sensory devices posted through out the yard to alert of any unwanted pests or people. Cameras are mounted inside the hive, outside the entrance and by the feeder to monitor all types of activities, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They have pictures of their queen on their computer screen. Their website has images of every queen they have ever had with little gold crowns photo-shopped onto each. The front door mat states, “Wipe your feet, all six of them.” The back door mat that used to say “Hi I’m Mat” has since been replaced with “Got Bees.” Every item of clothing has shapes representing a head, thorax, abdomen, six legs and wings either embroidered or stamped. Bumper stickers that read: “Bee Happy,” “Too Bee or Not Too Bee,” “Let it Bee,” “Bee Kind to Your Bees,” “Bees Happen,” “Give Bees a Chance” (I actually have this one), “I Love my Bees,” “Bees Aboard,” and “I Am, Therefore Let Me Bee” litter every square inch on their bumpers. They attend beekeeping meetings and workshops every weekend. They log into chat rooms and discuss the latest about their bees. Every book ever written about *Apis mellifera* has been read and re-read. A portrait of their first colony hangs over the

mantle and portraits of every colony since line the hallway. Anytime guests arrive they are offered a large array of foods prepared with honey, and pollen.

The other type of beekeeper, the type “C,” is a bit more laid back; maybe a bit too laid back when it comes to beekeeping. They figure bees have been around for millions of years so they don’t have to intervene too much. And hey, they read a book, so what’s the big deal, right? Dump some bees in a box and let them do all the work. So, they buy their package and plunk the bees into the hive and walk away. Then the following year they wonder out in the backyard to look for the hive they thought was over there by the Sycamore. “HmMMM? Well, maybe it’s over here behind the shed. Nope.” So after several hours of searching for the hive it is finally revealed. It is uncovered when a years worth of overgrown brush is cut away. It takes an extreme amount of effort just to open the lid. Once inside the hive all that is visible is wax moth webbing. It is so thick the frames won’t budge without a fight. Frustrated, dirty and sweating, the type “C” beekeeper returns to the confines of his home



The Survivor.

turns on the computer, and googles “how to get started in pottery.”

Then there is the type “B” beekeeper, which most of us are. We love our bees but they don’t consume our lives (except from February to July). We are saddened when we lose a colony but don’t have a lengthy burial service where each bee’s name is called while Amazing Grace is played live, on the bagpipes. We attend meetings, try to keep up on the latest information regarding the fate of our bees, and are so pleased when our bees make it through yet another year. Some days we may even find ourselves taking a moment while going through a colony and just watching, in wonder, the activities of the hive. We do procrastinate sometimes and know we should check our colonies sooner than later, but our personal life seems to interfere more often than not. But when the day comes and we extract that first super of honey and our bees are thriving we’re so proud to be a beekeeper.

Being a beekeeper in the 21st century has its challenges and it seems new ones are popping up on the horizon each week. With all the issues facing beekeepers today (mites, viruses, CCD, viruses, mites, CCD, and all things that come with mites (viruses) and CCD) protecting your hives from thieves or vandals is not that frequently thought about. I mean, who would want to steal or bother honey bee colonies? But it may be something you want to think about, especially since bees are gaining more and more attention. Honestly, I never thought about it myself until last Fall.

We have numerous experimental apiaries scattered over three counties. Several of our sites are located on University property but others are on private property. One of our sites is located at the Full Moon organic farm. It is a great place for bees and I never once thought twice about hav-



A Casualty.

ing them there. This particular farm is located on the outskirts of Athens. The surrounding area is a hodge-podge of small farms, larger home tracks and smaller neighborhoods. Our bees were located at the back of the farm along an edge of a small forest. During the day the bees were in full view of the farm crew, but once the crew left for the evening the bees were on their own. The farm house was a good half mile away from where the bees were located.

Last year I received a call from the farm's owner explaining that there had been a fire at our apiary site and we may want to come by and have a look. When we arrived, three of the four colonies were gone. Incinerated. Burned to the ground. Nothing left but a pile of ash, wood chips, a few nails and bits of wire from the foundation. It was heart breaking to see. However, there was a sole survivor and it was amazing that it survived. The bottom board had been completely burned away. The interior sides of the brood box and honey supers were scorched. The bottom bars of the brood frames were burned away and the wax from the bottom half of the frames had melted. Flames had actually seared the interior of the hive, but the bees and queen were still alive. Actually, the hive was thriving. But they were pissed off. As a matter of fact it was one of the few times I have had to walk away from a colony. They were not happy and getting madder by the second.

The fire had not only engulfed three of our hives but also about half an acre of the surrounding forest. It was amazing though that the entire east side of Athens Clarke County didn't burn up and blow away that day. We hadn't had rain in weeks and were facing the worst drought in decades. The forest floor was like

kindling. But the forest remained along with that single colony.

After the bees had finally settled down we examined the surrounding area and found a lighter, a crumpled pack of Camels and a honey super about 30 yards from where the colonies were located. The super had been slightly burned and obviously tossed aside. All ten frames were scattered about but the honey was still capped and intact. So, Dan Harris and I concocted the sequence of events that occurred the day they burned ole Dixie down.

A couple of punks with nothing better to do were walking through the woods late one day and came upon some white boxes. One kid recognized the boxes and said they were honey bee colonies. "Honey bees, man we better get out of here" said one kid. "Nah, I say we get us some honey" said the other. The third didn't offer any opinion as he took another drag off his cigarette and tossed his empty pack on the ground. So they walked over to the colonies and slowly took off the lid. Immediately several bees came out and greeted these unwanted guests. As they retreated, ball caps and arms were being flung about swatting away the bees that bombard their heads and torsos. Several hundred feet from the colony they finally stopped. No major damage, just a few stings but some severely wounded egos due to the fact that they all screamed like girls as they high-tailed it from the colony. After the embarrassment wore off and they caught their breath the anger set in and they wanted revenge. Finally the silent kid spoke. He said he had heard that smoke would cause bees to abandon their hive. "Let's light a fire and smoke the little &*\$\$#@ out" he said. They talked about walking back and retrieving a can of gasoline but decided that was too far and

they didn't really feel like walking the distance. Then the silent one spoke again. "We will come from behind, through the forest. We will silently, but quickly make a pile of dry leaves and set it on fire. There is plenty of dry stuff around, so it should light up pretty quick. Once the bees have left we will take what we want." So they did just that. They lit the pile and within minutes the fire had engulfed the forest floor, hives and nearby trees. A wave of uneasiness ran through each kid but it quickly turned into excitement as they watched the fire growing in intensity. When all four hives were completely engulfed they rushed in. They kicked over one of the colonies to break free the honey super. Instantly the bees attacked. The silent one grabbed the super and they all took off running, his yellow Bic lighter falling out of his pocket. Hot on their tails were a few thousand very upset bees. About 30 yards from the colonies the one kid finally dropped the super to swat at the numerous bees stinging his face, neck, arms, back and legs. The others, also covered with bees, were frantically running in circles bumping into one another. After a few minutes they all bee lined it for home and once again the high pitched sounds of girl-screams were heard for miles around.

Protecting colonies from this kind of senseless destruction is hard. Unless we are watching our colonies 24-7 they can't be 100% protected. But there are a few measures we can do. First it's a good idea to have colonies in sight of your house but out of sight from your neighbors or at least the street. Of course high tech sensory devices can be used, but most of us aren't into the James Bond gadgets and gizmos. If you have colonies off site and in remote areas a solar powered electrical fence may not only ward off the bears but may also deter criminal activity. Stealing colonies is also an issue. There's a GPS hive locator now on the market that will alert you by calling your cell phone if your colonies are moved or disturbed. This is a great idea, especially if you have a lot invested in your colonies. You should also brand your equipment and hive bodies. It's not a full proof measure but someone, somewhere may recognize your brand and call the police. I've always thought one of the best ways to deter



Stolen and abandoned booty.

anyone from messing with my bees is to put up signs that read, in big red letters, “Africanized Honey Bee Quarantined Area. DO NOT ENTER” and then under that, in smaller black print, “Venom is extremely potent and deadly. Unfortunately, the sting kit is temporarily unavailable. If stung begin praying immediately”.

To end, it’s June and in central Georgia our nectar flow has ceased. Yet there’s still plenty of nectar available to our north and south. If sourwood is your thing you better be moving colonies to your north Georgia Mountain sites sooner than later. We’re keeping our fingers crossed hoping that this year will be a good one even though the soils are still pitifully dry. There’s also nectar to be found to our south from a variety of cultivated crops. Wherever you or your bees may be, hopefully it’s been a good year.

See Ya! **BC**

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