

Winter Insight - by David Papke



Visiting the bee yard in winter always makes me dream about spring when the colonies are at their height of activity. Wintertime is the other side of the yearly cycle. Yet the bees are active when the weather permits and you will sometimes see bees flying in surprisingly cool temperatures, especially if the hives are in the sun. Watch the entrance; one can get a pretty good idea of the strength of the colony by the activity at the entrance. I'd rather assess a winter colony by watching the entrance for awhile and lifting the hive from the rear bottom board to judge the weight than opening up a hive and breaking all the propolis seals the bees constructed last fall. If not satisfied, I'll take off the outer cover and peer in the vent hole or even remove the inner cover, but I rarely remove frames in the wintertime. My beginner's curiosity was satisfied years ago and I now see no need in disturbing a colony without good reason. So, if the entrance activity seems purposeful (foragers, guard bees, house-cleaning bees, cleansing flights, loafers-all present) and the hive feels sufficiently and comparatively heavy (not obviously light), I leave them alone until the next warm winter day, repeating the inspections until the weather moderates sufficiently to perform a complete inspection down to the bottom board.

Now, if a colony is light or the activity at the entrance is minimal, I want to see the size and position of the cluster; I want to assess their stores of honey. At this point I realize I'm dealing with a potential problem and not an "everything-seems-OK" situation, so I've learned to anticipate a few common winter problems. I have on hand fondant to feed colonies if I cannot move frames of honey from the periphery. (I prefer to feed bees their own honey if at all possible but do not hesitate to feed fondant if need be). If the cluster is situated just below the inner cover vent hole, I need to open the hive to assess the size of the cluster and honey stores. A quick look is usually sufficient to "read" the situation. If the cluster has shrunken to the size of a softball, it is most likely queenless or too small to keep new brood warm so this is a colony I'll let go. One can go to great lengths to save (or try to save) a weak colony, but there is something to consider: without perfect knowledge or insight one cannot possibly tell why a colony has weakened (or died). So in my beekeeping practice I prefer to attend to the strong, healthy or "normal" colonies and let the weak ones go. You've read about raising queens from survivor stock to select for traits like mite resistance, vitality and adaptability to local conditions; well, letting the winter-weak colonies go accomplishes a similar purpose. And the equipment it frees up (after inspecting and cleaning) always comes in handy during swarm season. It's also an opportunity to cull old combs. I'm generally an optimist, I know, so I look for the possibilities in every catastrophe. I hate to lose a colony anytime, as much as any beekeeper (that let-down feeling appalls me), but it is a part of beekeeping and as fundamental as catching swarms.

I started writing this partly as a diversion to being snowed-in. I'm wondering when I'll get to visit my apiaries. I have pollen patties and fondant ready to go but am feeling thwarted by the weather. I've gotten a few calls from anxious beekeepers about their varied/buried hives. Not to worry. Yes, they can breath through the snow. And the snow is a great insulator so forget about the cold. Sit tight. Just bee prepared for the next sunny day in the 40's and get out there to be sure there is an open entrance somewhere on the hive. When they finally break cluster they'll have some serious business to attend to and need to get out! Bee Well. Spring is just around the corner.