

FINDING THE QUEEN

"Cherchez la femme"

Though I have been interested in bees and have kept them on and off from early teenage years, it was not till retirement some ten years ago and joining the Hunter Valley Branch of the NSW (amateur) Beekeepers' Association, that I was able to become more actively involved with the hobby and to gain confidence. As a young fellow, I found the brood chamber quite daunting. By the time I got down that far, the bees had become aggressive and I did not have fully protective gear. Besides, in those teenage years I could not afford such luxuries as full sheets of foundation comb, so the brood box combs were quite a mess.

However, with experience comes confidence, and now the brood box is the most interesting part. (Who wants to just look at combs of honey?) With confidence comes a host of new things to do, like re-queening, and that introduces the real brood box challenge--*finding the queen*.

The best thing a beginner can do to gain confidence with this or any technique is to join a beekeepers association where he can get hands-on experience and further his knowledge by interaction with others. At Tocal field days the novice can learn first hand from amateurs, commercial beekeepers and the professionals of the Department of Primary Industries, field officers and academics. At these field days the time spent questioning these professionals over morning tea, lunch or just "on the run" is often more rewarding than the formal presentations. It was in such a circumstance that I originally learned some myths and truths about finding the queen.

At morning tea with a group of fellow beekeepers I raised the question and voiced my frustration with repeated failures to find the queen. A confident and vocal amateur with a Dutch accent had no difficulty. "It is fery easy to find the queen, I tell you how", he said. "You blow smoke into one side of the hive entrance, then you blow smoke into the other side. You will find the queen fery easily on one of the middle frames".

Even to my inexperienced ear this sounded too easy and I knew that the lady was likely to be on the middle frames anyway, so later in the day I posed the same question and told the Dutchman's story to a real professional, one who has since proved to be a constant source of reliable advice.

"That sounds like bullshit to me", he said. "There is no easy way to find the queen, but I will tell you how I go about it". I knew immediately that this bloke knew what he was talking about, and I listened intently. I have followed the principle ever since, but he was right, *there is no easy way*.

METHOD

(This description assumes that there is a queen excluder in place if the hive is a multi-decker.)

Smoke and open the brood box in routine manner

Remove the end frame, look for the queen. If not found put it aside near the entrance.

Take the next frame and search it. If queen not found, replace the frame in the end position, next to the wall of the hive where the first frame came from.

Do the same with the next frame, replacing it next to the last.

Repeat the process till the queen is found, or the last frame is examined unsuccessfully.

If unsuccessful, *start again and repeat the process.*

Method of scanning

How and where do you direct your eyes when looking over the frame? This is an individual matter. Some just look, some have a set routine looking systematically round the frame clockwise or anticlockwise, or following some other set pattern.

Clues...where to look most intently

The queen may be anywhere, but she is most likely to be found where she has been working recently, on a brood frame with unhatched eggs. This is likely to be in the heart of the brood nest on central frames, but it is not at all uncommon to find her on the last frame examined, the end frame.

Special Difficulties

A small dark queen is much more difficult to find than a golden Italian. Obviously, marked queens are much easier to identify, so it is good practice to mark them whenever possible.

Obviously the more populous the hive the more difficult it will be to find the queen. Hence it is best to do the job in the middle of a warm day when as many bees as possible are in the field.

Young queens are very active and move quickly, usually away from the light around the bottom of the comb. If she so gets away to the other side after an initial glimpse of her, it is often amazing how difficult it can be to find her again despite knowing that she is on this frame.

Though it must be unusual for the queen to fall off a frame being examined, it is wise to hold it over the brood box in the process.

Personal difficulties: It is commonly noticed in the amateur association that younger people spot the lady more readily than geriatric eyes, however experienced they may be! It is unusual for the queen to be on a side wall or the bottom board, but these areas, must be examined if she is not found readily, and it is not easy to do so effectively. Also, the entrance of the hive and re-entering bees deserve close examination.

METHODS OF DESPERATION

So what do you do when you are thoroughly sick of the whole thing, having completely failed after being through the hive two, three times or more?

The first option is to give up gracefully and come back another day.

The second option, depending on the level of urgency or determination to find her *now*, is to try a more radical method of which I have no personal experience, though it has been convincingly described to me by an experienced and reliable beekeeper.
Dump all the bees from the brood box a few feet in front of the hive, replacing the bee-free combs (with brood) in the box.

Then watch the bees crawl back into the entrance, attracted by the brood. It is said that a small knot of bees will remain where they were dumped, and the queen will be among them (you hope!)

A modification of this appeals to me on principle, but again not personally tried. This involves putting a segment of queen excluder across the entrance before dumping the bees, in the hope of finding the queen trying to re-enter the hive.

Finally, it is worth repeating that there is no easy way to find the queen, and no substitute for patience and an orderly approach to the problem.