

FEBRUARY

February can be a difficult month for our bees: they are expecting the weather to improve as the day length increases and the queen will have started to increase her laying rate accordingly, but we often experience our most variable and extreme weather conditions in the shortest month of the year. As has become the norm in recent years a succession of volatile weather fronts has brought strong winds and gales, persistent and often heavy rain, frost and fog yet the winter so far has been relatively mild and my bees have been very active- nice to see but worrying, too.

So, what will February bring? With the onset of more seasonal cold weather our bees should finally form their winter cluster, but stores will be depleted and their unseasonal foraging activity may well have reduced the life expectancy of the winter bees- increased vigilance is needed now. As the brood nest expands the workers need to generate more heat and to maintain it, and this they do mostly by shivering their powerful wing muscles- a high-energy activity that requires a good level of stores to maintain it. The foraging bees will be out collecting pollen and nectar from early plants such as snowdrop, crocus, aconite, hellebore, mahonia- not forgetting those vital pollen providers hazel, willow, alder and blackthorn. These foragers are the winter bees, the workers that hatched in the previous autumn and remained in the hive conserving their strength until called on to provision and care for at least two brood cycles (at least six weeks of house bee working when the queen starts to lay and the colony begins to expand.

If these bees are not healthy, they will be unable to complete their tasks before they die and the colony will have great difficulty surviving through to spring- good varroa management and feeding are the key here. If your hives are light, then feed fondant or candy- directly on top of the frames in an emergency. Examination of the varroa floor insert will show the rate of uncapping of stores and will also show you the position of the cluster. This is the time of year when isolation starvation becomes a risk if there is a prolonged cold spell and the cluster becomes too torpid to move to better provisions. If you suspect this has happened, then it is better to briefly open the hive and move full frames next to the cluster than to do nothing at all. In an emergency you can lightly spray the bees with warmed sugar syrup and pour more syrup into an empty comb.

February Summary

Check hives for damage from the weather, livestock, or pests.

Make sure entrances are not blocked by dead bees, snow or debris.

On mild days check if bees are flying- do they look ok? any streaks of dysentery on the woodwork? is pollen going in?

Keep on hefting to check the weight of stores and feed candy if necessary.

Seal the entrances of any dead hives until you can take them away to investigate the cause- disease can be spread through robbing.

If the weather is benign you may want to take the opportunity to remove and replace solid floors or brush clean open mesh floors- easier with help.

Keep your eyes peeled for signs of Asian hornet nests and early emerging queens.

Check stored drawn comb for wax moth damage.