

JANUARY

January is another quiet month in the apiary: the bees should still be in their winter cluster, feeding on their stores and using their strong thoracic muscles to generate the heat necessary for their winter survival. When there is no brood to rear the temperature at the centre of the cluster will be about 20C, with the outer shell being not below 8C- any lower and the outermost bees will fall off and die. It is vital that the bees have enough accessible stores to consume, especially as the queen may already have started laying, and this requires the bees to raise the nest temperature to 34.5C or very close if the brood is to survive. This demand for food is why many beekeepers say that spring feeding is done in the autumn.

By now we should have got used to hefting our hives to estimate the weight of the stores inside and will know if we need to feed our bees. It is too cold to feed sugar syrup as the bees will not break the cluster and come up to a feeder, therefore we must feed fondant or candy either directly on the top bars or over the feeder hole if the cluster is centrally situated within the hive. Whether you use bakers' fondant, or a product specifically formulated for bees, put the cake or slice into a plastic bag or container with a couple of access slits on the underside so that the bees can eat it without the risk of it drying out or, conversely, melting and running down onto the cluster. Use an eke or empty super to give enough space and cover loosely with insulating material. You may like to feed a pollen supplement or substitute at the same time to give your bees an extra boost.

If you haven't already done so, there is still time to treat your colonies for varroa with the newly approved treatments, Api-bioxal or Oxuvar. If using the trickle method, ideally work with a partner to cut down the time each hive is open and use a warmed solution: if using a vaporiser, be sure to follow the instructions to the letter and observe safety precautions. You can locate the cluster easily if you check the floor insert for signs of uncapping of stores.

January Summary

Regularly check hives for damage by animals, woodpeckers or weather and check roofs for signs of leaks. Take a dry roof with you just in case.

Check that entrances are not blocked by snow or dead bees.

Keep on hefting to estimate the weight of stores left in the hive: feed with fondant or candy if necessary.

If you intend to treat colonies with oxalic acid, do it early in the month or you risk damage to brood if the queen starts laying.

Keep on cleaning and repairing equipment and make up some frames & supers ready for the spring.

Keep on reading and learning and make a plan for the active beekeeping season.

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