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LET'S CONTROL SWARMING

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Swarming is the natural tendency of bees to divide their colonies under conditions favorable for the survival of both the parent colony and the swarm. Beekeepers have better ways of maintaining and increasing the number of colonies, so we should discourage natural swarming.

Prevention

From mid-April until the main honey flow, we should examine our bees frequently enough to find the first preparations for swarming. Most years we can control swarming by breaking down queen cells at 7 to 10 day intervals. Bees tend to work upwards, so when the top hive body is almost full we should exchange it with the lower one, which is almost sure to have lots of room in it. Repeat this reversal until both hive bodies are almost full. This delays for several weeks the crowded conditions that lead to swarming. When the entire hive is nearly full, add a third or fourth hive body for the queen to work in. Provide additional ventilation through an upper entrance to help air circulation and temperature control in the brood nest.

Cure

Our bees inform us in advance when they plan to swarm. The first definite sign is an increase in the number of drones. Next, queen cells are constructed along the bottom of brood combs. The queen cells are started because the egg-laying activity of the queen has not kept up with the amount of larval food produced by young nurse bees, who thus do not have enough to do. Frequently by reversing hive bodies, adding more room and ventilation, and destroying the queen cells, we can prevent the bees from swarming until the honey flow provides full employment for the surplus nurse bees. Requeening every year with queens chosen from stock with low swarming tendencies also reduces swarming.

One cure for a pronounced case of "swarming fever" is to take out several frames of sealed brood and replace them with empty combs or foundations. At this time we should also destroy any queen cells found. We can use the brood from disease-free colonies to strengthen weaker colonies or for a nucleus with which to develop another colony.

We can divide the hive into two colonies as an even more drastic procedure. We must add a new queen or queen cell to the queenless part. We should not do this unless there still remains at least six weeks until the honey flow. Colonies need this much time to build back to good honey-storing strength.

* Revised from an earlier series prepared by Dr. M.D. Levin and G.F. Knowlton.

Many skilled beekeepers control swarming by the Demaree method. We use a queen excluder and at least two empty hive bodies with drawn combs to properly carry out this method. When the brood nest becomes very crowded and we suspect that our bees might be getting into swarming condition, we find the queen and put her, with the frame of brood she is on, in a hive body of empty combs. We place this hive body, with a queen excluder on top of it, on the bottom board. We then place another hive body with empty combs over the queen excluder with the two hive bodies containing the brood on top. This separates the queen from the crowded brood nest and gives her plenty of room. As the brood on top emerges, room will be left for later storage of honey. The bees on top will probably build queen cells, since they are so far from their queen. These cells can be destroyed, or used to rear a new queen to replace the old one. When the queen fills the hive body under the queen excluder, we can raise the excluder one hive body to give her access to the second story. When enough time remains before the main flow, we may want to repeat the whole process.

After the flow starts, we rarely need to worry about further swarming. If we allowed the bees to rear a new queen in the top super, we should place this super and queen down over the bottom hive body and kill the old queen; or we can let the new queen do this. As the honey crop comes in, we must provide enough supers to hold it all.

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