

There has been much criticism of late of the Meteorological Office's inability to forecast correctly. Last summer was supposed to be hot and dry. Again the winter was supposed to be mild but so far it's been the opposite – the worst and coldest period for almost 50 years. But forecasting can be a precarious matter even for beekeepers. I recently looked at last year's autumn issue of our magazine and saw that one of our leading Welsh beekeepers reminded us that any year ending in a 9 would be a good year for honey. Alas for him, like Elias, it did not materialise. He was, however, somewhat redeemed as, according to friends of mine in South East England, it has been a superb summer producing a good crop of honey!

Recently FERA, together with the relevant Welsh Assembly department, has been trying to get to grips with the problem of bee losses via the Healthy Bees Plan. An important part of the scheme involves informing and educating beekeepers on the handling and husbandry of bees, especially in relation to the disease and inflections that decimate the bee population. Part of the scheme involves 'Train the Trainer', i.e. holding courses for the experienced beekeepers so that they in turn can advise and guide within their societies. (This is nothing new in Wales; it was done in the 18th century when the Gruffydd Jones circulating schools taught reading to the masses!) The instruction period can be quite intense involving possibly one evening or one afternoon a week for 11 to 15 weeks under the City and Guilds system. It is a good idea to add to the number of local experienced beekeepers and would complement the expertise of the Bee Inspectors who already operate. I don't know what the response has been as the time allocated for enrolling was quite limited. Christmas probably hindered the process and the bad weather probably prevented many societies from meeting to discuss the scheme. Here in mid Wales none of the Further Education Colleges – who logically would have been the organisers – had received any information. Those wishing to attend would, therefore, be required to travel 50 or 60 miles in order to attend. True, the organisers and possibly the WBKA were prepared to share the cost but it would have required quite a sacrifice for those having to travel far. More thought and organisation was probably needed to make a success of the scheme.

It was interesting to read in recent issues about experienced beekeepers' comments on the Snelgrove anti-swarmer methods. I was under the impression that no one used these methods nowadays although the principles are still totally valid today. Snelgrove's emphasis was based on a number of principles, namely, lack of space for egg laying and storage, too many young bees in the nest, and the theory regarding the queen substance and feeding. No doubt most beekeepers who followed the system were perplexed by the manipulation and handling of the equipment. Personally, I was given a copy of the book by a frustrated beekeeper who could make 'no head, nor tail' of the system. The system did, in theory, appeal to me for the sake of swarm prevention and the raising of queens. I got down to making half a dozen Snelgrove boards during the winter and began using the system the following spring and summer. Yes, it did work to prevent swarming but it was a total failure with regards to queen rearing. Theoretically, the queenless young bees in the upper brood box would create emergency queen cells of the highest quality as almost all the young bees were concentrated in that brood box, the very bees required to build queen cells. In reality the number of queen cells built was very limited and in some cases none were built at all. I have now deemed the system a failure, as no stock was sufficiently strong when separation took place. Snelgrove operated on stock that had two full brood boxes but this would be difficult to accomplish with the indigenous dark bees bred in the cold and damp air of Ceredigion. I'm sure this is true of every system of swarm prevention; no system will work unless the bee stock is exceptionally strong. There is one other reason beyond the beekeeper's control: having put into practice a swarm prevention system, whether Snelgrove, Demaree or artificial, the weather must be right. Every system will fail if the separation is followed by two weeks of wet and cold weather.

In my view it is a system to be used in spring and early summer in a region where bees are ready to swarm in spring and are sufficiently strong early in the season. In our part of the country it is not until the end of June or early July that the bees are strong enough to be split and, therefore, too late for the Snelgrove system. It must also be remembered that Mr Snelgrove was a Somerset beekeeper, an earlier and warmer climate than that of Ceredigion. In order to extract full benefit from the system he recommended early feeding in spring in order to fill two brood boxes, even three sometimes. For this reason the system did not prove a success in my case although I persisted with it for several summers. However, having abandoned the system, I noticed that almost every hive was less prone to swarm in the following years, (I have read about another beekeeper's similar experience). On the other hand, it may be that having read his book and operated his system I had become a more observant beekeeper and, therefore, better at swarm prevention. If so it would be beneficial for everyone to read the book as it contains much basic and interesting information.

Recently there has been quite a lot of discussion about the use of Oxalic acid, in particular how strong should it be. Personally, I simply followed the instructions, and operated in conjunction with several other beekeepers. We used a standard preparation, i.e. 6%, pouring 5ml into every hive that was reasonably strong. That was the advice at the time or so we had understood. But now things have changed. The concentration must be limited to slightly more than 3% and no more than 5ml syringed between every seam of bees. This dosage is, therefore, considerably weaker than operated by us previously. Apparently too high a dosage could kill many of the bees although none of us had observed this despite using too high a concentration. I have now, however, reduced the concentration.

It is of interest that my fellow beekeepers, who previously used the acid, have now ceased doing so. From their point of view, Apiguard in the autumn, Fumidil B in the feed, already constituted enough chemicals without adding Oxalic acid to the list. So for two or three winters they have discontinued the use of Oxalic acid whereas I have continued. As far as I can observe their bees are no worse than mine; their stocks are equally strong in spring and winter losses are no higher. Is this simply a matter of luck? Is the acid treatment of little or no use or is there a deeper reason? Should one discontinue many of the treatments and allow the weak stocks to die out in the hope that the surviving bees will resist many of the diseases? Can one surmise that this is how the species has survived before human interference? We are sometimes led to believe that man is responsible for all diseases that affect bees. This is not true. Man cannot be held responsible for Acarine or Varroa, or for other insects that affect their wellbeing. Man can, however, be blamed for the rapid spread of such worldwide thereby reducing the bees' resistance and ability to survive. Many of us have wondered perhaps whether the bees have survived the recent month's hard weather. In truth bees have survived much longer and harsher conditions. Surviving the cold is no problem as long as they have sufficient food and a dry home.