

West Suffolk Bee Improvement and Queen Rearing course 20 & 21 July 2017

West Suffolk Beekeepers hosted this event with BIBBA and we were fortunate to have Roger Patterson as our course tutor.

For those who don't know him, Roger has 54 years of beekeeping under his braces and has been a BBKA trustee, is Vice Chair of BIBBA and is Vice President of Bee Diseases Insurance. Roger is the author of "Beekeeping a practical guide" and he manages Dave Cushman's website www.dave-cushman.net. Roger teaches all over the UK and internationally.

The course was fully subscribed with 12 delegates mainly from West Suffolk but with some from Colchester, Cambridge, Leiston and Ipswich. Mike Graystone the West Suffolk apiary manager and I attended and Mike had done an outstanding job in preparing the apiary for the course.

Although the course is predominately apiary based we started at Hawstead Village Hall to cover the theory before heading to Nowton in the afternoon. We covered assessing your bees and setting selection criteria – starting with temper and calmness on the comb. Roger recommends however many hives you have splitting them into two categories – A & B. A are your best 50% and you should take the opportunity to create new queens from these and B colonies should have their queens replaced at the earliest opportunity.



Roger covered various means of making queens – from both natural methods e.g swarm cells, supercedure cells and emergency cells and some of the artificial methods. Roger also covered some beekeeping myths in that it is believed that supercedure cells only appear in the centre of a frame

and swarm cells around the edge. Rather it is the number of cells which is the more reliable indicator 1-3 being supercedure cells and 4+ swarm cells.

One key aspect of improving bees that Roger stressed is that it is more important what you take out (cull) than what you propagate.

Roger also debunked two more myths – leaving two queen cells as insurance and the need for queen cells to be unsealed to make sure they are viable. Two queen cells is likely to lose half your bees to a swarm and a open queen cells is as likely to become dud as a sealed cell selected. A sealed cell is closer to emergence and getting your colony queen-right.

Roger then covered using artificial means of creating queen cells using queen-less cell raising colony which we proceeded to the apiary to try out.

When we arrived at the apiary we immediately removed a queen from one of the strongest hives to create a queen-less colony. Roger then inspected several of the colonies demonstrating how to assess them for temper and calmness. Roger selected the best of these to graft larvae into a cell bar.

The grafts were added after just 1 hour 15 minutes and left overnight. The books suggest waiting 8 days before grafting but this shows the bees are ready much sooner than you might think to accept grafts. One thing that Roger did that I had not previously come across was that he grafted two larvae into each cell as insurance knowing the bees would select the viable ones!

Day 2



We arrived at the apiary and opened up the hive. We were pleased to see that the cell bar introduced the previous day had 10/10 acceptance by the bees.

Roger finished demonstrating assessing colonies and then after lunch demonstrated the cell punch method then it was our turn to graft larvae.

We took 3 frames of larvae away from the apiary and into the nursery to avoid setting off robbing this is not necessary if there is a flow on but we didn't see much nectar coming into the hives. Every one got to practice grafting larvae of the appropriate age 1-2 days (these are the smallest larvae and usually next to eggs as the queen lays in circles from the centre).

Roger was very impressed with the temper and stability of the bees especially in one of the colonies which he believes have near native characteristics. So much so that he took a bar of larvae that he grafted and he advised me that even after a 4 hour journey home he had 10 accepted. It is a fantastic credit to Mike and his Husbandry over the years that we have such good bees in our apiary.



We took a graft of larvae from the best hive and these have been left to develop. Mike will transfer these to apideas to see if we can get some mated queens from our days in the apiary.

We hope to be able to follow up on this and Roger has promised a visit next year if we are interested. Further details to follow.

If anyone is interested in Bee Improvement or queen rearing please let me know and I can keep you informed of future events. Also if anyone is interested in setting up a Bee Improvement or Queen Rearing Group please contact me kevinthorn@me.com 07557 418418.