
Natural Beekeeping

a bee-centred approach



Natural beekeeping is bee-centred. Its basic premise is that the bee instinctively knows what is needed for the growth and prosperity of its unique colony. The beekeeper's part in this is, through careful and intelligent observation, to work with the bees to provide the optimum conditions for them to follow their natural instincts to build a strong and healthy hive.

The Horizontal Top Bar Hive



The Top Bar Hive is designed to imitate the conditions found in an entirely natural habitat such as a hollow log, which would give comfortable, dry and safe conditions whilst at the same time allowing access for the beekeeper in a way which would cause minimum disturbance to the bees.



Natural Comb

The system of top bars, furnished only with a line of wax or similar 'comb guide', allows the bees freedom to build natural comb of different cell sizes according to the needs of the particular hive, whereas the foundation in conventional frames is geared to the production of worker cells to deliberately suppress the creation of drone cells. Conventional beekeepers typically regard drones as something of a necessary evil, a drain on the hive's resources, believing their only useful function to be the mating of queens and so they seek to reduce drone numbers sometimes by as much as 75%. The natural beekeeper on the other hand, through observation would maintain that hives with a full complement of drones (between 5% and 15% of the population) seem to display a raised morale, increased honey production, a more vigorous laying capacity in the queen, and that the drones appear to assist in the regulation of the hive temperature. It has also been suggested that poor quality queens are the result of a decrease in drone numbers with the resulting reduction in the gene-pool.

Ease of Access - little disturbance

Because the natural beekeeper wishes to subject his bees to as little disturbance - and therefore stress - as possible, inspections needed to monitor colony health and provisions have to be as simple and efficient as possible. In a Top Bar Hive routine inspection can simply be to move aside each follower board to observe the build-up of comb and check the bees for signs of distress or unusual behaviour.



A more detailed inspection, by lifting each top bar in turn, if carefully done, also causes little disturbance to the hive and a negligible change in temperature, since the rest of the colony is contained throughout the process by the follower boards at each end and the top bars which form an unbroken roof. This retention of heat is particularly useful when checking on winter stores.

The same can be said of increasing the hive space. In a Top Bar Hive it is simply a matter of moving aside the follower boards to insert new bars so as to stay one or two bars ahead of the expanding colony. This takes only a few minutes at most and causes minimum disturbance.

Swarming

The natural beekeeper would seek to manage rather than discourage the swarming process and the shape of the horizontal Top Bar Hive is particularly suitable for creating artificial swarms without causing undue stress to the bees. The length of the Top Bar Hive allows room for the beekeeper to house an artificial swarm inside the same hive as the mother colony by systematically moving certain combs onto the other side of the follower board. The second colony is then able to establish itself gradually in the remaining space. This also makes it easy to re-combine the swarm with the mother colony at a later date if necessary. The close proximity means that both exercises create very little disturbance to the bees.

Protection

Although the bees are best left to look after themselves, they do require some help from us, though the natural beekeeper would keep this to a minimum. The Top Bar Hive offers certain protective features over that of the conventional hive, involving no interference to the bees. Because the Top Bar Hive is made with thicker timber than the conventional hive it maintains the internal temperature more effectively, also resulting in less condensation in winter. The internal trapezoidal shape is easier for the bees to heat, leaving no empty corners. Because the amount of space available to the bees can be regulated using the follower boards this not only helps in heat retention, as the empty space can be filled in harsh winter conditions with insulation, but also helps to protect a small colony from predators when it is too small to protect itself.



The system of holes rather than a large slot for an entrance makes it easier to reduce access to predators. The positioning of these entrances provides a further protection to bees during the winter. Because the holes are low down on the sloping sides of the box sunlight does not penetrate the body of the hive in winter to entice the bees to make foolhardy flights on sunny but too-cold winter days.

Bees are extremely ingenious, adaptable and forgiving but like all living creatures there is a limit to the amount of interference their nature can support. We seem to be witnessing the results of this in the declining bee populations of the present time and so we must do whatever we can to protect them from further depletion by re-evaluating conventional attitudes and working methods, keeping what, through honest observation, we find to be helpful to the bees and jettisoning all that is harmful. The effectiveness of the Top Bar Hive lies in the fact that its design has arisen out of observation of the natural habits of the bees themselves and not out of its convenience for the beekeeper, although it does happen to be simple and straightforward to use.