

Friends of the Bees

End of Year Summary Report 2018

Friends of the Bees is constituted as a non-profit Community Interest Company, supported by voluntary donations. Our stated aim is to make Britain a better place for pollinators. In particular, we are keen to encourage keepers of honeybees to take full account of the interests of other species, by creating habitat, planting and conserving suitable flowers and avoiding crowding out other pollinators. We also encourage beekeepers to consider keeping the native 'black' honeybee (*Apis mellifera mellifera*), and we have begun a breeding programme to support and propagate this bee, which has evolved alongside our native flora and has demonstrated its hardiness by surviving in several parts of the British Isles, despite pressure from diseases, parasites and imported honeybees.

Dartmoor Mating Stations

We have successfully negotiated a site on land belonging to South West Water on Dartmoor for use as an isolated queen mating apiary, which will enable us to selectively mate our native black queens, with a view to propagating them more widely. We have also put together a team of beekeepers to re-construct and bring back into use Brother Adam's mating station at Sherberton, located further towards the middle of Dartmoor, which was used in 2018 for the first time in its 93 year history exclusively for the native black honeybee.

We succeeded in raising and mating a number of new queens with substantial native DNA and we have acquired some DNA tested, pure-bred black bee stocks for the 2019 season, which will provide drones for our mating station and further improve the quality of our breeding lines.

Depending on weather conditions, which are especially relevant to mating behaviour, we intend to focus much of our attention this coming year on our black bee breeding programme, with a view to providing other beekeepers with reliable, good-tempered, native queens.

New Apiary at Marley Farm

We have been given the use of a site at Marley Farm, near South Brent, that was established some 50 years ago by Brother Adam of Buckfast Abbey, but which had fallen into disrepair since it was last used by the Abbey beekeepers about 10 years ago.

When we started work, the land was completely overgrown with brambles and we had to use scythes and billhooks to clear it. We have since created paths, planted apple trees and aromatic herbs, and built a shed for storage. We have kept most of Bro. Adam's concrete plinths in their original positions and built wooden stands to fit them. There will be several types of hive on this site, including an experimental Zest hive made from insulating blocks, several top bar hives, and probably at least one of Bro. Adam's original Dadant hives.

This apiary will be used for teaching purposes, and will also be a useful resource in our breeding programme, given its relatively isolated position.

Asian Hornet Preparations

The Asian Yellow-Legged Hornet (*Vespa velutina*) is a predatory species originating in China that has invaded and spread throughout France, and is now found in Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain and Portugal and is threatening Germany and Italy. Its diet comprises about two-thirds honeybees and one-third other pollinating species, including bumblebees, butterflies and even dragonflies.

This hornet is considerably more prolific and more aggressive than the native European hornet, and can easily overwhelm and destroy honeybee colonies. Many nests were found and destroyed on Jersey during 2018, and there were seven confirmed incidents across the south of England, from Cornwall to Kent, where Asian hornets had established nests. This number is likely to increase – probably significantly - during 2019, and while beekeepers are becoming more aware of the threat they pose to a wide range of pollinators, there is still a lamentable lack of awareness among the general population of just how dangerous these predators could be to our wildlife,

including birds and bats, which rely on insects for food. Contrary to earlier reports, they seem to be considerably more aggressive towards humans than our native hornet, *Vespa crabro*.

We have been looking at a number of possible ways to detect, track and destroy Asian hornet nests, including the use of thermal imaging, drones equipped with cameras, and electronic traps that can differentiate between the native European hornet (which poses no threat to indigenous insect populations) and the Asian hornet, based on such factors as colour, sound and mass. This work continues and we are working with local AHATs (Asian Hornet Action Teams) to ensure that information is shared.

We have received some grant assistance for this work, which has enabled us to buy essential equipment that should have a relatively long life. However, we will be seeking ongoing support, given the time-consuming nature of research and development and the potential scope of this work.

Administration

We have decided to discontinue with our membership scheme for beekeepers, as this created additional administrative work, and as we did not offer any real benefits to members, compared with non-members, we decided to simply ask our supporters to make single or regular donations, as they prefer. Such donations, along with supporting grants for specific projects, are currently our only source of income, but we hope during 2019 to be able to bring our queen-rearing up to a standard where we can sell mated queens, in order to provide some additional income.

We have no paid staff, and endeavour to keep our expenses as low as possible. We rent a workshop/storage facility at below market rent and our only other substantial, ongoing expense is transport, which is unavoidable, and which is kept to a reasonable minimum.

Intentions and Plans

We would like eventually to be able to rely on a large number of small donations, rather than a small number of larger grants, and this will require building our supporter numbers. We hope to achieve this mainly through making educational videos and via social media. Queen rearing may provide some income, once we have established stable breeding lines.

We will continue to research and develop 'balanced' beekeeping methods that prioritize bee health and welfare over considerations of productivity, while holding the aim of developing systems that enable the mutually beneficial interaction of bees and people. We will continue to encourage beekeepers to take account of the needs of species other than *Apis mellifera*.

We hope to recruit some more volunteers to help with practical projects, fundraising and publicity. We would also like to develop a longer-term plan to establish local FoB groups throughout the country, although BIBBA (*Bee Improvers and Bee Breeders Association*) may provide an alternative structure for such a network.

Summary

We have made some good progress in 2018 with the welcome financial assistance of several grants. In order to continue this trajectory in 2019 and beyond, we would benefit from a wider income base, spreading the load among a larger number of supporters. Meanwhile, we will continue to apply for appropriate grants, as and when they become available.

We plan to further develop our web site as a resource for our supporters and to increase our presence on social media.

We will continue to research means for combatting the incursion of the Asian hornet and to liaise with other groups engaged in similar activity.

We hope to establish one more apiary site during 2019 at Dartington, near Totnes, which will be close to one of our teaching venues, on certified organic farmland, close to plenty of good forage. This site is far enough away from our other apiaries to preclude an excessive density of honeybees in one area.

Philip Chandler, Director, Friends of the Bees CIC