

A Method of Swarm Control

(With thanks to David Cushman)

When queen cells are raised in a colony under the swarming impulse, the actions of the beekeeper will rarely discourage swarming completely. This method was devised in an attempt to fool the bees into thinking that they have already swarmed. Whilst it duplicates some of the situations of swarming, I doubt that the bees are actually fooled, but merely respond to their changed circumstances.

The principle behind any swarm management system is to separate the brood from the queen. Also a "true" swarm has an old queen, a 20,000 or so workforce of bees of all ages and no comb.

We can create a set of situations that mimic the natural system quite closely. If you wish to try this... You will require extra equipment (I am assuming National Hives and UK conditions.)

Stand, Floor, Brood Chamber, and a full complement of brood frames fitted with foundation, Crown board (inner cover) and Roof (outer cover). A manipulation cloth or another crown board are also useful.

In the following explanation I will refer to right and left. There is no significance in this, you should adopt whatever is convenient to you... Providing that you are consistent you will achieve the desired result. I make no reference to the use of smoke... You should use it as and when you judge it necessary.

First place your spare stand 4 or 5 feet to the right of the hive to be "artificially Swarmed" Remove the roof of the "parent" hive and place upside down on the ground between the hive and the stand that has just been positioned.

Insert your hive tool into the joint immediately above the queen excluder to break the propolis seal and transfer the supers, no matter how many are already in place, complete with crown board into the upturned roof thus trapping all the bees that were in the supers (this keeps them out of our way).

Remove the queen excluder and place out of the way for use later.

Place the spare crown board on the parent brood box (to calm the bees) then transfer the floor, brood box and crown board as one unit from the original site to the "New" stand.

Put the spare floor on the now vacant stand that is still on the original site, oriented with the entrance in the same direction as the original... Place the spare brood box with the frames of foundation on this floor and remove the centre frame leaving a gap. (all the flying bees that are out foraging will automatically return to this entrance). If you have a manipulation cloth or further crown board use it to cover the top of this newly placed box.

Now we must turn our attention to the parent brood box... Remove the crown board and then run through the box examining each comb until you find the queen (often easier said than done!). Temporarily cover the box with the crown board. Transfer the frame of bees that the queen is on into the gap between the frames of foundation on the original site (you should destroy any queencells that exist on this frame), put the queen excluder on this box and place the original supers on the queen excluder. If they are very heavy, consider adding another super. Returning to the box with the frames of brood remove the crown board, close up the frames and insert the last frame, (the one with foundation that came out of the gap), to one side then replace the crown board.

It now remains only to put the original roof back on the original site and our spare roof on our "New" queenless hive.

Let us take stock of what we have done. We have two colonies that can be described as "swarm" and "parent". The one on the original site has an old queen, an abundance of bees and almost no brood. This is very similar to the circumstances that a swarm is faced with. It also has stores of nectar and honey and the small amount of brood forms a focus for the bees activities.

Our parent has no laying queen, brood of all ages, queen cells that are about to "hatch" and a recently depleted number of bees. This is rather like the state of a colony immediately after a swarm has issued.

Our two hives are both going to be very busy for the next several weeks, the swarm has to draw much foundation for the impatient queen to lay in. The flying force of bees will decrease as the older bees die (it will be three weeks before there are fresh bees emerging).

Our parent colony will reduce the number of queen cells to that which its smaller number of bees can properly support, (usually two), and much of the sealed brood will be emerging giving an increase in the population of adult bees.

But we cunning beekeepers have a trick up our sleeve!... If after a week we swap the parent hive from the right side of the main one to a similar position, but on the left of it, then our returning foragers from the small hive will come across the hive on the original site first and enter there instead (this balances the numbers).
