

## Annual Bee Report – North East Region November 2011

### The 2011 Season – An Overview

In my report of last year I commented on the extreme weather of the previous January and the early return of wintery conditions late last November – little did I realise how severe those conditions were to become! I did suggest that we seemed to be entering a period where such weather patterns might become more commonplace, a thought borne out over the last 12 months which saw sub-zero temperatures not seen for decades give way to record highs.

How did the bees cope with all this? Actually, generally very well. The early cold conditions will most likely have brought brood rearing to an early conclusion and the bees were clustered tightly throughout December. The New Year saw temperatures climbing above freezing and gave an ideal opportunity for those using oxalic acid for Varroa control to apply the treatment before queens came back into lay. Colonies expanded rapidly in the mild dry conditions as they took advantage of the copious amounts of early pollen available in most areas. In fact, I cannot remember seeing before such large and generally healthy looking colonies so early in the spring. Such a rapid build-up caught some by surprise and swarms in early April were not uncommon, others took advantage of the situation and got their queen raising off to an early start. Unfortunately, although remaining dry, the weather turned cool and cloudy for much of May and many of those early queens failed to mate satisfactorily.

March and April saw a good nectar flow from tree blossom but under the developing drought conditions the rape was disappointing, particularly in areas with light or sandy soils. The spring blossom finished early and the middle of May saw the start of a month long 'June gap'. Large colonies need more food and those in areas such as the lower Pennines where forage is sparse, were reduced to near starvation. Even colonies with good reserves declined in strength until boosted again when the rain eventually came and warmer weather saw the start of the flow from blackberry and early summer flowers.

Colonies remained strong for the remainder of the summer – it was difficult to fit all the bees into a brood box and even two supers ready for the heather - and despite another poor August (the coolest nationally for 19 years) most beekeepers have reported very good yields from the heather moors, though in many areas lighter patches in the combs suggest that late flowering willow herb and clover may have contributed to the crop. Colonies left behind, or moved, to forage on the Himalayan balsam east of the Pennines did not produce the surplus we have come to expect but reports from 'over the hill' – where more rain fell in spring and early summer – were much better.

Brood nests diminished rapidly during August (some colonies returning from the moors were completely broodless) and at the same time many colonies were

showing evidence of increasing Varroa levels. In such circumstances it is advisable to start Varroa treatments early – before the end of August – to ensure that the winter bees reared during the autumn period are free from the effects of mites and associated viruses. Any delay could result in a sudden and devastating collapse of the colony as the small amount of brood remaining becomes heavily parasitised. Varroa can, of course, only itself breed when there is bee brood present and early commencement of brood rearing and large brood nests may have also afforded an opportunity for Varroa numbers to rise more quickly this year. It can be difficult to determine the best time to treat, especially with thymol based treatments when there is a late nectar flow, but it is better to treat early and allow the bees to use the late flow for winter stores rather than squeeze out the last drop of honey and risk losing the colony in winter – dead bees won't get any honey next year!

Rising temperatures towards the end of September and a mild autumn (another record, this time for the warmest October day) have encouraged colonies to turn winter feed into brood – good for the increase in numbers of young bees going into winter but of some concern that hives are somewhat lighter than we would like. It would be advisable to start 'hefting' early this winter and to feed with fondant if in any doubt.

### Colony Losses 2010-11

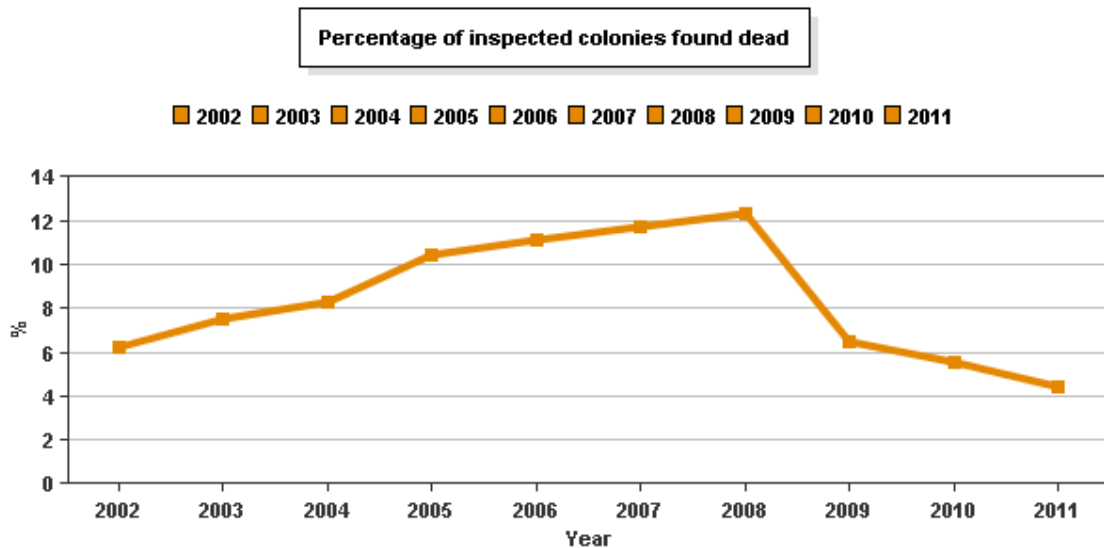
Statistics collected by the Bee Inspectors during the season from over 240 beekeepers indicate that colony losses were much less variable across the region than for the previous two years and although a little higher in some counties, losses in North and South Yorks and Derbyshire were significantly lower bringing the overall average from the survey down to 13.2%. There are always exceptions to the rule and my sympathies go out to beekeepers whose losses bucked the trend.

Region	Colony Losses (%)			
	2007-8	2008-9	2009-10	2010-11
Derbyshire	31.2	34.4	21.1	14.8
East Yorks	50	19.8	14.6	15.2
North Yorks	34	11.7	29.9	11.3
Nottinghamshire	48.3	15.7	12.6	16.3
South Yorks	56.5	30.7	36.8	12.7
West Yorks	35.7	21.6	19.1	20.3
County average	42.6	22.3	22.4	15.1

The major cause of colony losses still appears to be Varroa related – not just the effect of high mite levels in winter, but also the timing and type of treatment. It is possible to have a large colony with very few Varroa mites going into winter but having high residual virus loads that shorten the lifespan of the bees resulting in rapid depletion of the colony which then dwindles to nothing in late winter.

The early and prolonged cold weather last winter put a strain on the bees, particularly small colonies, some of which were unable to generate enough warmth in the cluster to move onto food combs and died of isolation starvation. However, 5 frame nucs and even smaller successfully overwintered provided that they were well fed, kept warm and dry and packed with young bees. There were fewer apiaries affected with Nosema or dysentery than the previous year though the bees were certainly glad of a cleansing flight after such a long confinement (memo to self – don't park the car under the flight path!)

The number of dead colonies observed nationally during apiary inspections has been monitored for several years and shows a similar continuing general reduction in colony losses since 2008.



I have recently received several reports of an alarmingly high Varroa drop post treatment causing me to be concerned that we may see a reversal of the trend this year. High mite counts may be caused by treatments (particularly thymol based) being ineffective due to low temperatures at the time of application or failure to prevent loss of thymol vapour through open mesh floors or wide entrances. Recent mild weather may also have increased the potential for mite re-invasion due to robbing of collapsing colonies in the vicinity or through drifting. We need to continue to monitor during the winter period and be ready to use an appropriate treatment if required to ensure that the first cycle of brood in the New Year is not adversely affected. For further advice on Varroa control, please see the free NBU booklet 'Managing Varroa' or the NBU web site, <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase>

### **Foulbrood Diseases and Inspection Statistics 2011**

A total of 4666 colonies in 877 apiaries were inspected in the North East Region this year. In common with other regions there was an increase over last year in the incidence of EFB with 44 colonies in 18 apiaries affected.

The incidence of American Foul Brood (AFB) was also higher than last year with two new outbreaks in East and West Yorks giving a total of 20 colonies in 5 apiaries affected. However, there was no recurrence in the Scarborough district this year.

The location of foulbrood disease by 10km squares are listed in the table below.

County	10km Square	Colonies with EFB	Colonies with AFB
Notts			
Derbyshire	SK26	1	
	SK45	1	
East Yorks	TA06		4
	TA15		11
North Yorks	NZ90	2	
	SE53	2	
	SE54	1	
	SE63	7	
	SE66	1	
	SE79	4	
	SE99	4	
	TA09	3	
South Yorks	SE50	5	
West Yorks	SD92		5
	SE21	5	
	SE22	8	

Further details of disease incidence including maps and disease trends can be found on BeeBase.

All beekeepers are welcome to register on this site and will be able to access personal inspection records, information on the Healthy Bees Plan, research projects, bee health, legislation, news and a wide range of advice and general information. A new feature added this year is the interactive record log enabling you to keep track of your own inspection records.

All beekeepers for whom a current e-mail address is held will receive an automatic alert if a new case of foulbrood is found within 5km of a registered apiary. It is essential that apiary records are kept up to date so that we know who to notify of disease found in the area. Please either use the self-registration pages or notify me directly if any apiary information needs updating or to add your e-mail address.

You can also sign up for NBU e-mail updates, again, let me have your e-mail address and I will add you to the circulation list.

## **Education and Advisory Services**

The North East Region team of Bee Inspectors supported a number of District Association events during the season and two more of the popular Bee Husbandry Day events were held at York and Leeds. These events provide a good mix of classroom and practical sessions aimed at the improving beekeeper. Plans are already under way to hold further sessions at Murton and Sheffield in 2012. We are also planning to join with the Northern Region to hold a Beekeeper's Forum in early March at The Food and Environment Research Agency, Sand Hutton. Representatives from every County and District Association will be invited – further details will be announced in the New Year.

My diary is already filling up for the coming year, so if any Association would like me or one of the Seasonal Bee Inspectors to be involved in any summer programme events, please feel free to contact me. I am also available for talks, mainly on bee health or bee husbandry, during the winter period.

## **North East Bee Inspectors**

John Drakes joined the team as a SBI for the second half of the season to replace Neil Pont who decided not to continue in the role this year. Some reorganisation of the areas covered by myself and the SBIs has been necessary and for 2012 should be approximately as follows:

Ivor Flatman – West and South (West) Yorks  
Dhonn Atkinson – Central North and West Yorks, South (East) Yorks  
Sandra Kinchin - North Yorks and Teeside  
Pete Allanson – East and North Yorks  
Tim Roper – Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire  
John Drakes – North East Yorks and Teeside

To confirm who your Bee Inspector is from April to September you can use the post code search function on the BeeBase contacts page or for enquires at any other time please contact me.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the Region's beekeepers a happy Christmas and every success in the New Year.

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