

## **Feral Stocks of Honeybees and Varroa**

By Magnus Peterson

The letter from John McLean in this month's "Scottish Beekeeper" raises the issue of the survival of feral honey-bee colonies in areas where Varroa is present. My own thoughts on this have moved along similar lines, and I have had interesting discussions with John about this. Of course some people have even suggested that the extinction of feral colonies would be a good thing, since otherwise they will provide a reservoir of Varroa-infested colonies which will repeatedly re-infest our managed stocks.

Now my own experience in this area where we have had Varroa for more than five years is that not all the feral colonies have disappeared. But in contrast one of the points John made is that any feral colonies which can survive in the long run untreated in a Varroa-infested area must have some characteristic about them which is allowing them to live with the parasite. If this characteristic is a heritable genetic one, then these bees will be a potential source of desirable genetic characteristics for our own managed bees. So the question now arises as to whether, as John asserts, this is a genuine observation of survival in the presence of Varroa, or whether these are desirable sites which are being repeatedly re-colonised by swarms which have escaped from managed apiaries.

Another possibility is that there is some environmental factor which helps feral colonies survive in the presence of Varroa in certain areas.

How are we to find out whether such suggestions are just wild ideas, or whether they have some basis in fact? I believe that this is an area where the ordinary SBA member who has a watchful eye for what nature reveals can provide invaluable help, but it will not be a quick process.

My hope is that I may be able to recruit from the readers of this journal who watch what goes on in their own area of Scotland a panel giving a reasonable representation

across the whole of Scotland, who as the years pass may be willing to watch known sites where feral honey-bees are still living, and to report on them twice a year. If a spring report of a surviving colony is made about May, then it is surely safe to assume that the stock has survived the winter. If a following autumn report states they are still there, then with a bit of luck they have not yet succumbed to Varroa. On the other hand, if a spring report states that a site is now unoccupied, but the following autumn report states that the site is once more occupied, then clearly there has been recolonisation by a swarm from elsewhere

– whether from a managed apiary or another feral stock. The section following this article gives a form which you could photocopy, fill in, and send off if you were willing to join such a panel of volunteers. Of course if you know of more sites than there is space for on the form, you only need to send an extra piece of paper with your response identifying where these colonies are.

What would you be letting yourself in for if you volunteered?

My own idea is that if the idea proves viable, I or my successor would send off a set of letters to the volunteers in April and September each year, enclosing a stamped addressed postcard for each volunteer to fill in, giving current details of the feral sites known to that volunteer. Once that is filled in and sent off, that would be all. If the idea is a success, then there would be a brief twice-yearly report on the scheme in "The Scottish Beekeeper", probably in June and November. Here's hoping that it will work, and that it will provide some good news for a change in the shape of light at the end of the Varroa tunnel.

If you would like to be a volunteer, then please fill in the form that follows, and send it off to:

Magnus Peterson, Balhaldie House,  
High Street, Dunblane, FK15 OER.

## Form for prospective volunteer monitoring Feral Honey Bee Colonies

I wish to participate in monitoring the progress of feral stocks of honeybees in Scotland. I am an active beekeeper and know the difference between honeybees, wasps and bumblebees.

Name

Address

Postcode

The following are particulars about FERAL STOCKS OF HONEYBEES IN MY AREA of which I have personal knowledge.

**Note: (Ideally, include a six-figure Ordnance Survey Grid reference For 'Location' but any other unambiguous description of the location will do).**

### STOCK 1

Location

**KNOWN** duration of continuous past occupation of the site

Environmental factors which may be of significance in survival:

### STOCK 2

Location

**KNOWN duration of** continuous past occupation of the site

Environmental factors which may be of significance in survival: