

Managing an Aggressive Colony

By Margaret Thomas, NDB

Handling aggressive colonies always presents a challenge, but Margaret Thomas is more than up to the task and she shares her tips on how best to do this.

This situation is usually managed by moving the aggressive colony to a remote site, finding the queen and requeening with a queen of a known, good-tempered origin. In all colonies, finding and marking the queen in early spring makes her easier to find and, at later inspections, confirms she is the same queen you last saw in the colony. Clipping one or both wings is an integral part of the 'ten-day inspection system'.

For normal, non-aggressive colonies

When finding the queen:

- Approach the colony quietly.
- Some beekeepers smoke the entrance gently as this lets the bees know you are there, then take the roof off gently. Do not 'clump' around.
- Smoke gently into the gap where you are going to use the hive tool to 'cut the hive' to remove the supers.
- Remove the queen excluder, without jarring the bees, by loosening all corners if it is framed and gently twisting. If it is unframed, loosen a corner and peel off gently, wafting smoke gently across the combs to give bees time to move out of the way. Be patient, the bees need time to go through the gaps in the queen excluder.
- Check the queen excluder for the queen, then place it to one side or at the front of the hive. If you have missed her and she is on the excluder, she will be able walk back to the brood box.
- Loosen the dummy board and remove it gently and straight upwards without crushing bees or brushing the bees on the adjacent comb. This manoeuvre is greatly aided if your frame spacing is accurate.
- Remove the first frame gently; if it is a food comb, after a quick glance, place it on the other side or the front of the hive where it will not touch the queen excluder, or put it into a nucleus box.

- Then move onto the next frames. Look at the 'dark' side first. Search each frame in a systematic way: bottom, around the edges, then the comb face, looking in a circular motion covering all the comb, and then look at the edges. Now turn it over and do the same on the second (light) side.
- The queen is most likely to be on a frame of eggs and young brood. Check each frame, keeping smoke to a minimum to keep the bees under control. When all the combs have been searched, work your way back. Sometimes a young, still flighty queen will be driven back and you could find her on a food comb, the last you look at.
- Each comb should be replaced gently and butted up to the previous frame inspected; do not leave a gap between the frames as bees may be crushed when tightening up later.
- When the queen is seen, follow her from behind and catch her by the wings or herd her into a cage. Do not catch her by the abdomen. If caught by the wings, give her a thumb of the opposite hand to hold on to. Lightly grip her legs/thorax with the first and second finger.

Clipping the queen

- If you are going to clip the queen's wings, clip a third off of one or both wings. Take care not to cut off a hind leg, which she may use to try to brush off the scissors. Place the scissors, check for a leg, if certain it is not in the way, clip.

Marking the queen

- Mark her on the thorax with a dot using a queen-marking paint (do not use Humbrol paint as it takes too long to dry, and some nail varnishes mimic alarm pheromone, so these are best avoided). Before marking her, place a dot on the hive to ensure the paint is not going to gush out and run all

over the queen. Even if the paint comes with a brush, the stem of a blade of grass dipped on the brush puts a nice circular dot on the queen, and is less likely to put paint on her antennae, legs or other parts.

Tip: There is an international colour marking system for marking as follows:

Years 1 or 6	White	Mnemonic:	Will
Years 2 or 7	Yellow		You
Years 3 or 8	Red		Rear
Years 4 or 9	Green		Good
Years 5 or 0	Blue		Bees!

- With the task done the queen, now marked, can be put back on the comb she was found on. You may need to smoke her if the bees are too inquisitive or pay too much attention to her. In the unlikely event that the bees try to ball her, smoke heavily.
- Gently place the comb back into the hive.

Managing an aggressive colony

Trying to find the queen in an aggressive colony is a trial and can result in a severe stinging and failure to find the queen, so take care, work calmly and wear protective clothing at all times.

Method

- Select a good day at around midday if possible.
- Get help and everyone should dress up well with ankles and hands well protected as well as wearing the normal 'bee-tight' bee suit.
- Have a spare floor ready.
- Light an efficient smoker and ensure it is well lit with cool smoke.
- Smoke the entrance heavily to stop the bees exiting in a rush.
- Remove the roof.
- Cut between the queen excluder and supers using a hive tool and remove the supers, placing them onto an upturned roof, smoking heavily.
- Remove the brood chamber, with floor and queen excluder *in situ*, to as far away in the apiary as possible.
- Leave the colony open.
- Place a new floor on the old site, add the supers so returning foragers have somewhere to go and replace the roof.
- Go and have a break, leaving the colony for at least two hours. The older and more aggressive bees will have returned to the supers, leaving the less aggressive nurse bees behind.
- Go back to the original brood chamber and try to find the queen as described above, in 'finding the queen' using minimal smoke. If this fails, use a second brood chamber to place the frames into, in pairs, with wide gaps between each pair.
- Have a cup of tea.
- Go back to the brood chamber and, again using minimal smoke, split the frame pairs, looking at the 'dark' side first. This is easier with two people handling one comb each. The queen will have gone into the dark between the combs.
- As a last resort the bees could be sieved through a queen excluder into a fresh box (preferably a brood box), leaving the queen behind on the queen excluder.
- Once you have found the queen you must kill her because the colony temperament comes from her.
- Introduce a laying queen in a slow release cage where the bees have

to go through candy to release her. Place this cage on or near brood where the queen can start to lay.

- If not using a nucleus box, return the brood chamber to the home site and rebuild the hive on the same day.

If using a nucleus box, proceed as follows:

- Return the brood chamber to the old site the same day and leave for one week. The remaining bees will make emergency queen cells.
- Dress up well in protective clothing as before, and, using plenty of smoke, shake all bees off the combs and destroy the queen cells. It is important to destroy all queen cells.
- Transfer the nucleus with a new queen into a full-sized box and, using the newspaper method, unite the nucleus to the original colony, placing the nucleus brood chamber above the old brood chamber. Any aggressive bees will not encounter the new queen right away; they will not detect her until her pheromone has been dispersed throughout the colony. The new box should contain at least three empty drawn combs for the new queen to lay into and a dummy board.



Not all bees are passive bees like this one. Honey bee (Apis mellifera), Cumnor Hill, Oxford. Photo by Charles j Sharp with thanks. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

- If there are supers, then place a queen excluder and newspaper between the nucleus brood chamber and the supers to prevent the new queen from getting into the supers. The newspaper is not essential, as super bees are less aggressive, but why take the chance?
- Feed the colony if necessary.
- Check in a week that all is well and rearrange the frames containing brood into one box on the original floor board and remove spare frames for fumigation with ethanoic (acetic) acid. The bees' temper will usually change surprisingly rapidly in the presence of the new queen.

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