

***Apis Mellifera Mellifera* the beautiful Native Irish Honey Bee – by Pauline Walsh.**

It is amazing that six years ago this week, I was at my first NIHBS conference and AGM in Tullamore where I as a new beekeeper met and got massive support on the journey with my bees. I was asked to write on my work with *A.m.m.* for the NIHBS page on the Irish Native and Rare Breeds Society website.

My bee story begins with me attending the organic college An tIonad Glas in Dromcollogher 2006 where the September checking of bees and harvesting honey began. We were offered the chance to go and attend with Jim McNamara and Andy Burke. I jumped at the chance and every other time I was willing to assist if no one else availed of the opportunity. I was not only introduced to bees but to our native Irish honey bee *Apis mellifera mellifera* [*A. m.m.*]. The introduction was just perfect with bees being so docile and easy to work with. The following year I purchased 2 hives to begin my journey then purchased one swarm and then another came the following year - sadly both died and I was devastated.

So this put me in pursuit of longer term education on bees which meant waiting for the QQI level 5 course to be put in place which happened by 2013. Finally I would know how to manage the bees and be able to grow with the knowledge and support of the beekeepers I would meet along the way.

Being based in south east Limerick at the time when Jack Hassett et al were beginning their research on the native bees I was lucky to be able to assist in finding wild colonies so the wild colonies could be studied as well as the ones worked by beekeepers. I have worked the *A.m.m.* from the beginning and learned the value of having the adapted bee for our area. Flying while damp and cold, as low as 7°C. Their docility means I can have a colony close to the house and watch in the winter when the weather is inclement. I was really excited when the research proved we have our own subspecies of *A.m.m.* in Ireland and our area has very pure stocks who are surviving without treatment for the Varroa mite.

In 2016 a few of us set up the 3 Counties beekeeping association covering Cork, Tipperary and Limerick though we have members now from Kerry, Clare, Dublin and Down [secretary@irishbeekeepersassociation.com] with great encouragement from Aoife Nic Giolla Coda and Micheál Mac Giolla Coda. As part of this formation we became a Voluntary Conservation Area [VCA] which links into the South Tipperary Beekeeping Association which covered the VCA south of the Galtee Mountains. Our members know we only work with the native Irish honey bee and are so glad to be supporting our beautiful bee. This group has gone from strength of 22 members heading for strength of 100.

The pleasure of working with this bee has enabled me to let others know of the docility of same. We have junior members who work with the bees and because of their nature *A.m.m.* are easy to work with for children.



My grandsons watching swarm walking into a hive.

I get calls out for swarms and the public are not panicking when they see bees either in a swarm or foraging. Many of my collections are videoed by the person who has called me and they watch without fear because of the docility.

There is an awareness of the need to protect our pollinators and our native Irish bee. People are now getting to know the difference between the Native Irish Honey Bee and the dreaded wasp. Most would have had fears of the honey bee because of wasp issues in the past.



Young beekeepers watching swarm gathered on a tree.

We are lucky at the moment the area is mostly dairy farming and a good share of the hedge rows are still growing and not cut back every year. On a good year yield can be quite good so we can harvest excess honey. We do have a problem when the weather, which we are so dependent on, does not allow for honey harvest due to the need for the bees to keep all they have to survive the winter. There is a growing problem at the moment with the growth of national dairy herd and some farmers cutting the hedgerows back and the planting of grassland without clover which causes the loss of forage for all pollinators including the honey bee. The use of herbicides [always a bone of contention as not meant to affect insects but bees would take poisoned pollen and nectar home to feed their young] and pesticides are another cause for concern.

I feel I am so lucky to have got into beekeeping with our native Irish honey bee *A.m.m* working and developing the colonies with their docility so I can share with future generations how to work with this amazing and valuable creature. The protection of our native bee is very important to me. We need to stop importation of non-native bees because of depletion of the genotype and

the risks of diseases being brought into to the country which would cause destruction of our valuable asset.