

The Native Honey Bees of Connemara, by Gerard Coyne

Beekeeping in Connemara during bygone times provided an important addition to the income of the smallholder. Indeed, it would have been a welcomed additional resource all along the Western coastline. The traditionally shaped 'sections of honey' would, typically, have been removed from the hives during the month of September and then sold on locally, in markets/fairs and continued to be available for purchase right up to the Christmas time. The price, for many of those years was, on average, approximately a "Half Crown" or "two schillings and sixpence" in the scarce and hard earned imperial money.

I still remember fondly how my mother would always reserve a couple of these valued, precious commodities and meticulously keep them hidden away in her "safe storage" press; just in case a winter cold/flu cure would be required for family members or the close neighbours. I can still recall poking my finger into that delicate, crisp wafer to sample that lovely honey taste within and I can still recall how the exquisite taste would linger on my palate. That taste memory left a lasting impression on my young mind and was probably the trigger for my initial interest in the fascinating world of the Honeybee and other pollinators; which developed and refined over the following years.

During the eighties, I acquired a copy of Beowulf Cooper's book; "The Honeybees of the British Isles". This book aided me in realising the vital importance of our Native Dark Honeybee and the relevance that such a bee still existed and would urgently need to be proactively valued, preserved and protected. Some of the extracts from this book inspired me to further cultivate my thoughts and try to act and find a method to protect our locally adapted bees. When I realised the real significance of our Native Bee and its characteristics to survive our climate; I realised that if this bee is to be found anywhere in its original state in this country, it would most likely be in existence in the Connemara region.

What other type of Honeybee would survive and withstand the unpredictable climate variations out here, along the west coast? Connemara also has certain, unique advantages for the Native bees' survival for contrasting reasons; i.e. the lack of tillage areas and the wild, uncontrolled wandering hedgerows and the abundance of wild, untamed areas under nature's and not man's intensification efforts!

In my quest to learn more skills and knowledge, I decided that I would become a member of the Galway Beekeepers Association where I learned some additional beekeeping skills and opinions from the beekeeping fraternity. I then began rearing some new queens myself and also making up some nuclei.



Our first batch of queen cells.

At one of the association meetings, I also learned of a beekeeper in Co. Tipperary who was breeding some very good quality Native bees' strains; that were docile and with easy-to-handle traits. I decided that I should contact that beekeeper, who, turned out to be none other than the renowned Irish Beekeeper, Micheál MacGiolla Coda. After a long chat on the phone, he assured me that the bees in the feral colonies that I had been monitoring in Connemara, were probably equal in quality to any other bees in the country and that these had the most appropriate gene pool for optimal survival within their own domain. I got great encouragement from this advice and was thus encouraged to appreciate and propagate the breed from this local bee gene pool; I am still glad to be able to continue to do so to this day.



Connemara Queen.

As well as the appropriate type of honeybee, I now began to think about the local biodiversity and the other pollinators here. There is very little intensive farming in Connemara. Thankfully for our bees, the volume of sprays and weedkillers applied to our local farmland is minimal. Our bees have a diverse range of foraging opportunities, once the rain stops! From the willows and dandelions of the Springtime to the Summers' hawthorn, blackberry and white clovers; plus many more flowering shrubs and trees continuing through to the heathers of the Autumn and winding up with the ivy bloom at the end of the bees' foraging season.

Beekeepers need to be mindful though, as quite easily, the delicate balance may tilt and there could be a risk of overpopulating an area with honey bees alone; this would have a knock-on negative effect on the wild bee/other pollinator populations. The balanced solution that works best for me is to keep a maximum of four hives at each apiary site. I believe that the honey bees are now contented, and work very well and are not so inclined to swarm and are much more docile in handling traits.



Workshop in Sean Osborne's apiary.

After many years of working with the bees they still manage to amaze me; for example, how they always seem to be prepared for whatever weather the spring and summers surprise us with! In our area, the build-up tends to be slower; it's like they are always keeping an eye on the weather, they possess the inner knowledge to recognise that to build up numbers too quickly, would be a recipe for disaster if the weather were to change for the worst, with the result that they may run out of stores and risk the colony's chance of survival. This current year was really an example of a year when our locally adapted honey bee proved their worth. During a long dry spell this Spring, the plants were not parting with their valuable nectar; any moisture they had in reserve was being kept for themselves. The bees responded, in turn, by a slower colony build up; however, gradually as the dry spell came to an end, the queens responded by starting to lay more eggs again and the build-up of numbers continued until the end of July. Then, during two, good fine weeks they were finally at 'full tilt' and then packed in their great crop of honey.

My possibly controversial, policy is to leave most of their summer harvest labours (honey) with the bees themselves. After a bad summer I would probably leave it all to them. Anyhow, the bees have not provisioned for the beekeeper to take away their surplus honey stores! That surplus honey was meant, in reality, to be there as a bee contingency plan in case of bad late spring!

Honey bees will definitely get stressed when their stores get too low and there is not enough available to them for the leaner months ahead. With stress, comes disease and weakness and then, maybe a rapid fatal end for that colony. The bee's reactions may be likened to the "Scrooge" tale; when his funds reduced too much, he started to worry and fret and become angry. After all, bear in mind that if the following Spring happens to come early and the nectar flow is good; the colony will rapidly rejuvenate and then the surplus honey may still be available and could then be removed without any excessive stress on the bees. We need to be more mindful and to respect the bees and allow them continue their natural lifecycles relatively undisturbed; after all, they have proved down the centuries of time to have the masterplan for their own survival.

