



The Managed Mentoring Program on getting started in beekeeping.

# Managed Mentoring



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## Robbing Behavior

Lesson | Robbing



# What is Covered in this Module

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Foraging Behaviors

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Robbing Catalysts

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Robbing Events

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Robbing vs. Orientation Flights

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Robbing Prevention

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Mitigating a Robbing Event

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Robbing Signs

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Robbing Behavior Insights

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# Conventional Foraging

## □ Natural Foraging

- *Foragers will leave the hive in search of resources*
  - Conventionally that means plant materials and water: Nectar, Pollen, Propolis and Water
    - Bees also forage for other materials that they bring back to the colony and/or ingest along the way.
    - You might see them in wood materials for pulp, in mud seeking minerals, scavenging bird feeders for various particles and so on.
  - One form of foraging is the taking in of cast offs from insects. Insects consume something and excrete it out the other end as a sugary substance
    - Aphid Forest Honey, Lanternfly Honey, and other examples are prevalent



# Alternative Foraging

## □ Opportunistic foraging

- *Sometimes content is presented through circumstances*
  - Factories that make sugary goods, County Fairs, and other man made event present opportunity for bees to find sugar based solutions to harvest
- *Robbing Other colonies*
  - Colonies that do not survive in the wild; Colonies that are weak and subject to attack when resources are scarce.
  - **Bees will attack other colonies and take them over to get their resources**



# Robbing

## □ Susceptibility

- *A normal colony is typically safe from other colonies*
  - European honeybees have developed behaviors where guards are posted that prevent other predators, including foreign honeybees, from making entrance for raiding resources
  - If one maintains a strong colony, then typically the colony can defend from robbing
- *Weaknesses present opportunities*
  - If a colony is not balance in contrast to the other bees in the ecosystem, then it can present as a target

**Robbing:**  
Opportunistic  
foraging behavior  
of honeybees  
taking resources  
from other  
colonies



# Expanding upon Weaknesses

## □ Weak Hives

- *If a colony has a small population in contrast to competitors, it may not be able to muster enough of a defense to protect itself*

## □ Size Mismatches

- *If one hosts large full size colonies alongside smaller form factors, Nucs for example, this can lead to problems*
  - Even a full sized, well staff Nuc may find problems protecting itself in an extreme onslaught of a better manned attacker



# Intense Foraging Pressures

## □ Sometimes conditions will encourage robbing

- *Lean seasons, during a dearth for example, will result in an uptick in aggression for opportunistic foraging*

## □ Artificial Stimulation

- *It is more than a suggestion that open feeding gives a taste for forager exploration*
  - Many times, beekeepers notice that if food is provided in the area, bees will somehow exhibit a penchant for searching far and wide for more, including probing other hives in the area

*Consider the practice of setting harvested honey supers out for bees to clean up*





# Varroa Transference

## □ Connection of Robbing and Varroa

- *Sometimes colonies succumb to pressures of varroa*
  - They either dwindle due to impacts, or abscond outright
- *Opportunistic foragers will find weak hives and raid them*
  - As they are in collecting the resources, they can pick up any errant varroa in the colony and bring them back to the host colony
- *Beekeepers need to be on watch in late summer and through fall*
  - Sometimes neighborhood hives collapse later in the year and colonies that were clean are suddenly laden with mites late in the fall



# Robbing vs. Normal Forager Activity

## □ What happens during a Robbing Event?

- *Foragers look to raid resources through force entry*
  - In a normal arrival of a friendly forager, the bee will land on the entrance of the hive and walk into the entrance
    - During the entry, the bee would be inspected either directly or indirectly
      - Sometimes guards physically encounter the bees, other times they may respond to the odor of the bee and come to alarm.
      - One of the key clues to detect a friendly bee is scent. Do they smell like other bees in the colony? Or, sometimes, if they are carrying a bounty – they will be let through
    - If they do not match the scent of the colony, or they are a foreign entity (wasp, or other predator for example) they will be challenged



# Robbing vs. Normal Forager Activity (cont.)

## □ Forced Entry

- *Land and Scuffle, Dart Past the guards, or Full Onslaught*
  - On some occasions a robber will simply land and try to walk in.
  - A more common approach is an attacker looking to **dart directly into the entrance**, and bypass any guards
    - Typically once a bee gets past the guard they bully their way into the resource, raid it, and take their bounty back out to their destination
  - In extreme situations, a large compilation of bees will simply attack all at once and overrun any colony defenses, in a an all out barrage



# Confusion: Robbing vs. Orientation

## □ Sometimes it can be confusing

### ● *Robbing Bee Flight Behavior vs. Orientation Flights*

- Both present as a lot of bees flying around the entrance in an unusual fashion
  - Sometimes it is hard to discern which type of activity is going on, but with some more precise evaluation, you can often tell the difference
- Robbing is more assertive
  - Robbing bees move like a prize-fighter. They bob and weave in more direct lines and can often be seen dart toward the entrance to bypass guards.
  - They inspect for weaknesses. Bees will be looking all around at seams, under the lid, seeking cracks or weaknesses to bypass security
  - Orientation flights never involve bees tussling at the entrance

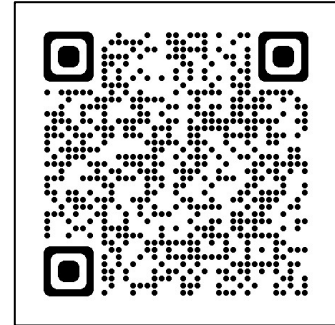


# Confusion: Robbing vs. Orientation (cont.)

## □ Orientation

### ● *Timing and Circumstance*

- Orientation flights, are more purposeful: bees flying in circles taking in the surroundings and the hive and not assertive in any way
  - One thing to keep in mind about Orientation is that it is based on new bees coming out and inspecting the landscape.
  - It happens usual at certain times of the day, and when the colony is rearing bees in earnest
- If at the time a robbing event is going on, use the knowledge above to think about normal orientation. Consider if the event being witnessed falls in line with what is a periodic orientation activity or is it out of character?



Short video about  
orientation flights



# Protection Against Robbing

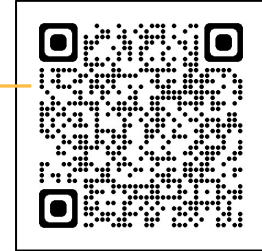
## □ Primary Defense

- *Make the entrance defensible*
  - The number one tactic is to close the entrance down to slow the possibility of a colony being overtaken and give the guards a fighting chance
  - Closing down the entrance is a first-best-action. Use an entrance reducer
- *Consider Robber Screens in times where risk is high*
  - Devices have been devised to alter the entrance design of colonies to provide even further defense



# Robber Screens

Video of Simple  
Robber Screen in Action



## □ Simple to Complex Designs

- *Bee Catalogs and Internet Designs abound*
  - Some are simple, and others are quite sophisticated. It is personal preference on how you might want to employ tactics to deal with this
- *Design Features*
  - One key tactic of many designs is to alter the path to entry; blocking off the normal entry.
    - The colony learns quickly the alternative path while robber bees are thwarted when they try to dart into the hive through a barrier.
  - Some guards provide the ability to fully close off a colony if needed



# Avoiding Enticements

## □ Setting off Inadvertent Robbing

- *Beekeepers should avoid needlessly enticing the bees*
  - Use care when performing hive inspections that you do not leave resources out that could start a robbing event
    - Leaving frames unattended, spilling honey, and other items could set off events that stir robbing impulses
  - Open feeding in any form
    - A key aspect to open feeding, if you are going to practice it at all, is to present any resources at a distance where it presents as 'just another forage source'.
    - There is not enough information to give specifics about how to do with any assurance and as a new beekeeper you might want to simply avoid the practice altogether.





# Encountering Events (Live)

## □ From a small skirmish to a massive event

- *Robbing comes in several forms*

- Sometimes you might see a small contingent of bees trying to break through the entrance
- Other times it can scale up to a full-on skirmish
  - There will be a super aggressive mass of bees flying at the colony, bees will be boiling off the entrance – falling to the ground, bees fighting everywhere and a lot of tension in the air.

- *In either case – solving the problem comes from denying entry*

- Solutions include Entrance reducers to more aggressive direct interactions



# Mitigation

## □ Denying Entry – Correcting Root Causes

### ● *Small Scale: Entrance reducers*

- Employ entrance reducers or robber guards and make the entrance defensible. Close off any cracks and eliminate any possible enticements as covered earlier

### ● *Massive Attacks: Two Tactics*

- Bed Sheet
  - Employ an old white bed sheet. Wet it down and drape it over the full stack of boxes
    - This disorients the bees as they cannot see ways to attack
- Setup a sprinkler over the hive(s) being robbed
  - This mock rain event will thwart bees trying to fly in the vicinity and break up the event

*Be sure to put on  
a full bee suit!*



# Relocate?

## ❑ Consider spreading hives apart from each other

- *Hives can be spaced farther apart to make them less of a target*

## ❑ Close down and relocate

- *Any hives that have small colonies or are in vicinity of bigger hives*
  - A large colony sitting next to a small colony is a form of enticement sometimes
  - Hives in risk should be given protection for defense, and you should also truly consider moving them away from potential threats
  - Move Nuc boxes, boxes with small to moderate colony sizes, or small single-chamber boxes to another location or even across the property



# Robbing Signs

## ❑ Shredded Comb

- *When bees rob honeycomb, especially capped honey...*
  - They tear at the cappings, leaving flakes and debris everywhere. They ravage the comb

## ❑ Off Season Robbing

- *Another form of robbing: Colonies robbed after winter losses*
  - A hive that dies in winter is going to be a source of early season forage for opportunistic foragers. Bees will smell the hive, test it, and if they find it open, they will raid it of its stores.



## Robbing Signs (cont.)

*Often a sign that is discovered post a robbing event*

### □ Robbing Stains

- *Bees tracking through opened honey during robbing pursuits will track honey all the way out*
  - They often leave telltale 'robbing tracks' on the entrance – especially if a colony has an upper entrance

### □ Exodus: Fleeing an opened box

- *Bees will often scurry up and out of honeycombs when you take off the inner cover; this is a sign of robbers fleeing the scene*



# Old School Wisdom

- It is said that...Flush bees do not rob
  - *When hives are well provisioned, and have large caches of reserves, they are less apt to go on a robbing spree*
  - *When there is a scarcity and hives are in need, they will work harder at foraging*
  - *Keep your colonies flush in summer and well provisioned*
    - Especially if there is a dearth in your area



# Robbing Risk

## □ New Beekeepers; Do not Fret

- *If you have two hives in the yard, it is not likely to result in a robbing event*
  - Risk of Bullies: It is also not that common for neighborhood hives to come in and raid colonies *unless* there are weaknesses that can be exploited
- *Robbing risk goes up with more hives in proximity to each other*
  - When there are many hives in contact with each other, and there are mix of colonies in different stages of development – it ups the risk of robbing



# Robbing Summation

- ❑ Strong health colonies protect themselves
- ❑ Smaller, or weak colonies, should be guarded
  - *Take protective measures to protect smaller developing colonies*
- ❑ Watch for events and act as directed
  - *Maybe not so pragmatic*
    - This is a hard thing to say as we do not watch our bees 24x7. More akin to if you witness something – have a plan ready and take appropriate action





# Closing Comments

- **Customary Close**
  - Where we stand, where we are going...
    - *This lesson covered the basics of Robbing Events*
    - *Our next lessons set the stage for some fall activities:*
      - Being on watch for Mite infestations in Fall
      - Propping up any weak hives
      - And understanding why we would collapse hive to small footprints for winter



# Q&A

- **What Questions did we not anticipate?**
  - If you have feedback, you can leave a constructive comment; but be nice.
  - You could also send an email to [comments@managedmentoring.com](mailto:comments@managedmentoring.com)
    - *Please refer to this video in the subject so we know what the reference is.*

