

Going to the Heather

Adrian Waring, NDB

An Article from:

BeeCraft

The Informed Voice of British Beekeeping

The practicalities of taking your bees to the heather

BY HEATHER (ling), I mean *Calluna vulgaris*. This acid-soil-loving plant still grows in our highest areas and also in lowland heathland. Heather shoots form the main part of the diet of grouse and, because of the high status of grouse shooting, grouse moors form one of the main reservoirs of the plant for beekeepers and their bees. In fact, British heather moorland accounts for three-quarters of the flower in the world.

Heather doesn't cover the whole of these islands. Those beekeepers near to heather moors can stay put but the rest of us have to move colonies to the crop. You may wonder why we do this. It's like going to shop one-hundred miles from home. It is for the honey.

Distinctive Honey

Heather honey has a distinct, strong flavour – it can even hold its own against slightly burnt toast! It has a strong aroma, a reddish-brown colour and it sets like a soft jelly but will flow when agitated, ie, is thixotropic. It has to be pressed from the comb and retains air bubbles incorporated during the pressing. This is a very typical feature. To sum up, it has a unique taste and smell, it has to be deliberately sought out and it is difficult to process.



Claire Waring

Colonies on the heather

Those who like it have to pay more for it because of these difficulties and they are prepared to do so.

Where Is It Found?

Heather flowers after our main honey plants have largely finished. It is affected by temperature, like all plants, and global warming has had an effect as it has on most other flowering times. Low-lying heather probably starts to flower at the end of July and probably finishes in the northerly highest altitudes by mid September. Scotland has the most extensive heather moors in the British Isles but there are also heather moors in the rest of the UK. Look for moors where grouse shooting takes place.

Other beekeepers may well be able to help you with possible sites on or near heather moor. The 'rent' is often a pot of honey per colony. Whatever is agreed, it must be done before you

go. Beekeepers have no rights to just dump bees anywhere. There is no part of the UK that isn't owned by someone or some organisation so make sure you obtain permission first.

Beekeepers often go in groups to share transport. I remember going to the heather squashed in the back of a van opposite DP Townsend, one of the two 'Fellows' of the British Beekeepers' Association. Heather-going is a universal leveller – and so much fun.

Heather-going Versus Feeding?

You can just pack up any old colony and take it to the moors. Some will get a honey crop. Many will just fill their brood chambers.

However it is better to get your colonies into the best possible state to benefit from the crop.

Bees start preparing for winter in July. Honey is concentrated around the broodnest where the wintering bees will have the easiest access. This is most obvious in dark bees and non-existent in very prolific foreign bees. This characteristic seems more intense on the heather and bees seem to fill the broodnest first before they enter the super. It will be most marked in colonies with an older queen. This means that even colonies that fail to produce a surplus in the super may well have got all the honey they require for winter.

Comparing the cost of feeding a colony against the cost of transport may make heather-going a feeding proposition. This depends on your site, the weather and your bees. Possibly because of the protein and high water content, some bees winter badly on heather honey.

Preparing the Colonies

What do both the bees and the beekeeper require to produce a good crop



Air bubbles remain trapped in heather honey



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of heather honey? 'Old' queens lay fewer eggs and stop laying earlier than 'young' ones. The obvious solution to this is to head the colony with a young queen, best of all, one of the current year.

The colony also needs a good population of flying bees. This can be achieved by diverting the flying population of the next colony at the home apiary into the one going to the moors, but a better way is to start nuclei in June and build them up by inserting combs of sealed brood from other colonies into them as such combs become available.

By the time you go on your trip, the aim is to have a good-sized broodnest of about 8-9 combs, the rest being combs of honey.

Needing a Super

The colony ready to go to the heather should be needing a super.

The possibility of getting a crop of heather honey becomes more of a probability if the super contains drawn comb. The simplest way to process heather honey is to sell it as cut comb. This means that your super comb must be built either of natural comb or based on what is sold as 'thin' foundation, unwired, of course.

To stop the thin foundation buckling and stretching, you need to curl the top edge a little way round the frame wedge. If there is a gap formed between the bottom bars and the bottom edge of the foundation, this is no disaster. It allows the foundation to stretch evenly. Just make sure your hive is set level on the stand.

How Many Supers?

I only ever started off with one super on a colony. One full super is better than two half-filled ones with possibly uncapped comb. If more supers are required, the trip to the moor with the extras will give you an excuse to go and see your bees. If extra trips are uneconomic or impossible, then two supers per colony should be sufficient.



Heather honey is thixotropic

In some years, bees have been known to store 100 lb (45 kg) or more; but these crops are as common as a hen's toothy grin.

One thing you won't need is a queen excluder. As I mentioned, the natural broodnest in August is a reducing one. I have never known a queen go into the supers while on the heather. Bees will enter the super more readily if there is no excluder in the way.

Moving Colonies

In the majority of cases, bees have to be moved to the heather. This means blocking the entrance and strapping the hive. If bees are confined, they can get hot. They panic. They get hotter.

At 41 °C (105 °F), the wax of the combs softens so much

that it collapses. I have been told it melts. This is not so. Wax melts at around 63 °C (145 °F) which is much higher. Whatever the temperature, if the combs collapse, the bees die. It can happen in a literal second.

When moving bees you must provide them with air either with a wire cloth travelling screen on top of the hive or, these days, an open-mesh varroa floor with the tray removed. In very hot countries, bees are moved with no screens but the hive entrances are left open. These colonies are placed without jarring onto a vehicle which has the engine running as the vibration seems to keep the bees calm and quiet.

In the UK or if you are putting hives inside a vehicle, the only option is to confine the bees. Moving air will help to cool them and you can spray a little water over the screen if they get really hot. In a trailer, in the open, the same thing applies, of course.

Overheating will be made more certain in a car if you break the journey and park the car in the sun. *Verbum satis sapient!*

Don't Forget the Roof

When packing hives into the back of a car/van or onto a trailer, you have to

think of the roofs. The best vehicles have a flat bed at the back and gap between the wheel arches which will take two roofs side by side, ie, for National hives, approximately 100 cm (40 inches). The best way to deal with the roof is to stand it upside down and place the strapped, closed up hive inside it. This means that you are guaranteed to arrive at the moors with a roof for each hive rather than having left one behind at home. Putting a hive in its roof saves space but isn't possible if your hives have projecting floors. Bees don't need an alighting board. They are quite happy with a flat vertical surface so long as some of it is flush with the hive face and below the entrance.

When to Go?

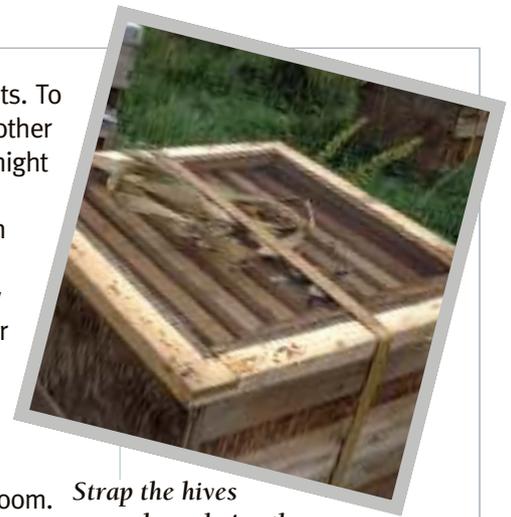
The next question is at what point in the flowering period should bees be moved to the moors. The traditional date was around the glorious twelfth – before or after, but not on the day. These days, the end of July might be better.

Since on heather moors, high ones especially, there may be no other source of food but the heather, the timing should be early but there should be some open

flowers on the plants. To go too early when other sources of nectar might be available to the bees could result in the adulteration of your heather honey with that from other sources. You need someone on the spot to tell you when the plants are beginning to bloom.

At some point during the flowering period, there will be a honey flow. This can be very intense. Ten hot days in August could give your bees a worthwhile crop. Flows may not occur until September and then they are less good simply because the days are shorter. It is very rare to bring colonies back that are lighter than when they went but it is possible.

During the day or two



Strap the hives securely and give the bees ventilation

before the journey is due to occur, you can put on the super(s). The hive parts can also be fastened together. For first-time movers, the straps you can buy are perfectly adequate. However, they must be really tightened. When you 'ping' the strap with one finger, there should be a definite 'note'. Also during this couple of days, while there is no pressure, you

A hive barrow enables you to move heavy hives easily



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can make sure that no other way into the hive exists except for the 'official' entrance. This can be closed just before you start loading the hives.

You must also plan and make ready the method of closure. Bees don't need large entrances at the heather. In bad years, bees can be robbed. An entrance block will be perfectly adequate so insert one when you put on the super(s). All that remains 'on the day' is to close that small gap. I use plastic upholstery foam rescued from discarded cushions. Whatever size the entrance, you will need a piece that is slightly wider and longer. This means that the foam is squashed into the gap. If it is too loose, bees will start to squeeze out, usually on the motorway.

What Time of Day?

Many people move bees at night because it is cooler. I have spent enough time kneeling in nettles, blocking entrances by the light of a torch to feel that instead of working with a hive when it is getting darker, it is better to work when it's getting lighter. With all other preparation completed beforehand, all you should be doing is blocking entrances. Bite the bullet. Get up at dawn and have a lit smoker handy to drive any strays inside and the whole job can be done quickly. Block

entrances first, then move the colonies. Always leave a small colony behind in an apiary. Believe me, all the bees that may be left behind will end up in it.

Hive Stands

Depending on what may be available at the site, you may well need to pack something on which to place the hives.

This could be two 50 x 100 mm (2 x 4 inches) wooden rails per colony. If you make them about 1.6 m (5 feet) long, they will take two colonies side by side. Alternatives are folding hive stands or pieces of corrugated iron measuring roughly 600 x 600 mm. You will also need odd pieces of wood for levelling the hives. There may be large stones on the site but do not remove any from dry stone walls.

Siting the Hives

Hives should be sited with entrances away from the direction of the prevailing wind. You also need to ensure that they have a source of water near the hives. If necessary, also make sure they are protected from livestock.

When all is ready, put on your veil, replace the hive roofs and release the bees. They can be very cross, so don't site hives near paths or homes. On the other hand, some take the whole procedure in their stride and eventually come out to see what all the fuss is about.

Bringing Them Home

Return to collect the bees in mid

Face hives away from the prevailing wind and protect them from livestock



A very full super

September. The hives may be very heavy. After all, one British Standard brood box nearly full of honey can hold 50 lb and then there is the weight of the super. The boxes themselves, the bees and the roofs can mean each stock weighs the best part of 100 lb or more.

By mid September at altitude, most bees will be in the hive at whatever time of day you arrive but you may need help loading the hives. One of the best pieces of kit is a one-man hive barrow. Here, you bring the handles together so that lugs go under the bottom of the hive to support it as you wheel it to the vehicle. The handles are released in the reverse procedure and then the hive can be lifted into place.

Rearrange the Apiary

When you get home, you can place the hives anywhere you want so this is a chance to reorganise the apiary if you wish. Remove the supers as soon as convenient.

I have pressed heather honey from the comb but this requires a heather press which is cumbersome and expensive. It is also possible to loosen heather honey using the appropriate gadget (see the equipment suppliers' catalogues) and

then spin it out using a tangential extractor.

Cut Comb

I have always felt the way to go was to produce cut comb and I strongly suggest this for your first time at the heather. Lay the super frame flat and cut out portions of comb that are fully capped or as near as possible. You can buy special cut-comb cutters or you can use a sharp knife. Special plastic cut-comb containers are available from suppliers but if you are just using it yourself, you can cut pieces to fit your own containers. Let the pieces drain on a wire cooling rack before packing them into the plastic boxes.

Wintering

Some bees winter well on heather honey but some don't. What helps is to feed about 2-3 litres of sugar syrup. You may have to remove one or two frames of the honey in the broodnest to be able to do this. Some people like to put on an empty super (with frames) under the brood box instead of removing the brood combs.

Have a Go!

Going to the heather can be profitable. It can be hard work. It certainly can be fun. Why not have a go? *

