



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Happy as can bee

A swarm of bees can mean many things to many people. To the uninitiated they can be sheer terror. "What!" Screams Auntie Em, "We have a swarm of bees in the backyard! Call the police!" I actually heard that statement from a terror-stricken person in Portland years back.

The fear of "The Swarm" is perhaps one of the most overblown old wive's tales still going around today. Springtime is the season for swarms to appear. Please think of them as FreeBees for the taking, and no threat to life or limb.

That said, climate change may be bringing us a real reason to fear "The Swarm": the Africanized honey bee, aka "Killer Bee." This bunch was introduced to into Brazil in the 1950s in an effort to increase honey production. In 1957, 26 swarms accidentally escaped quarantine and, since then, have spread throughout South and Central America, arriving in North America in 1985, and discovered in the American Northwest in 2011. The warmer it gets, the further north they'll come.

These ladies are nothing to fool around with, they have a very unpleasant way of looking at life: everything other than them is the enemy, and instead of one bee coming out to sting an intruder, the whole colony's after you. I wouldn't go near a swarm from this bunch without being inside my best bee suit and all the seams taped shut.

But back to our own sweet bees. Honey bees in this part of Mother Earth are quiet, peace-loving gentle folk who just want to make honey and be left alone. They will NOT sting you for just being there; you have to provoke them. If you stand in front of their home and pound on their roof, that'll get you what you're asking for.

Our European honey bees, *Apis mellifera* (*Apis* is Latin for "bee", and *mellifera* means "honey-bearing"), who arrived in North America with the Jamestown migrants and later on with the Mayflower Pilgrims, form a matriarchal society; the whole outfit is held together by one queen. If another queen enters the scene the whole hive goes haywire,

and the resident queen and her crew will try to kill the interloper. On the other hand, a box of bees without a queen is a worthless mess of confusion.

Here's the way it seems to work with my bees weeks before a swarm comes buzzing out: Life is going along hummily in my Langstroth bee boxes; workers are making cells in the wax foundation for the queen to lay her eggs in, and it's running smoothly.

When the eggs hatch, nursery bees feed the larvae which pupate to make more adult bees. The workers are coming back to the hive with pollen, nectar and other plant material to make honey (food for the bees), wax and propolis to hold the physical plant together.

Old Bee-keeper Jim has added a third box to the stack of bee boxes so he can have more honey (and to help the bees store enough honey to survive our cold winters). But soon the action has brought about a huge population of bees, more than there should be.

A wiser bee-keeper would

then "split the hive" by moving one box of bees to another location and placing a new queen in; then a box with ten empty frames is put in its place. In no time at all, the colony would fill it and life would go on.

But Old Jim is a lazy bee-keeper. He allows the colony to become too big without doing something about it, and soon the pheromones of the old queen are not strong enough to saturate the stack of boxes.

Because of that, several workers shout, "The Queen is dead!" and start building drone (male bee) and Queen cells. The larvae fed "Royal Honey" become queens, the first of which becomes the New Queen, the other would-be queens are killed, and that's when trouble starts in the colony.

The New Queen emits a chemical signal to the drones and they leave the hive and mate with her in flight. The sperm she then contains will last her entire lifetime, but the fun-and-games for the drones is over. The workers will not allow them back into the hive and they slowly

starve to death, or get picked off by bee-predators, such as ash-throated flycatchers.

The new queen's pheromones are not the same as the Mother Queen and soon the new queen begins to attract workers and a new colony forms. The New Queen soon has her own colony of thousands and she takes over the hive. That's when the Old Queen is forced to leave in a swarm made up of anywhere from five to 15,000 bees.

If you see them, don't worry; they're happy as can be, stuffed with honey. They'll settle down in a great ball-of-bees on the limb of a tree, while the scouts are already out looking for their new home.

The only thing that can stir them into a frenzy is something large and hairy (like a bear) going after them. The queen's deep within the swarm, surrounded by her entourage of workers tending her every need. If everything goes right, a bee-keeper will show up, gently remove the limb from the tree, carry the swarm to an empty bee box, remove half the frames, then gently brush or shake



PHOTO BY SUE ANDERSON

You gotta' gather up the bees before you can gather the honey.

the bees into the empty box. That will happen, and you can watch, if you call clyde@tlcinc.com or 541-549-0998, or jimnaturalist@gmail.com, 541-480-3728.

Then, if you present to witness this operation, you will see how cooperative a bee colony is; several of the workers will come to the entrance of their new home, turn themselves about and fan their queen's pheromones outside telling the bewildered bees buzzing about, "This is our new home, come on in!"

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