

First Story

“Cultivate Curiosity and Anticipate Miracles: Observations of Life”

Monday October 17, 2011

The Swarm

By Linda Diane Feldt

The Saturday of Memorial Day weekend was wonderful bee weather: sunny and warm, with only a bit of a breeze. The activity on my garage roof, where my hive is kept, was frenetic.

My neighborhood in Ann Arbor’s Old West Side was relatively busy as well. My next door neighbor and I had spent the morning hauling rocks home for our gardens. A friend was helping me scrape paint off my garage in preparation for a new coat, and my housemates were watching the Pistons on TV.

I had gone into the house for only a moment when I was suddenly aware of a shift in the sound and activity outside. A quick glance out the window confirmed what I immediately suspected. The hive was in full view of the second floor bathroom, a mere fifteen feet away. The air was full of bees, and more were pouring out of the hive every second. The garage is about 16 by 20 feet, and the entire area of the garage and about 15 feet into the air was full of bees.

The activity was so rapid that each bee was lost by the time I focused on it. It was easier to focus on the whole mass, which was slowly moving across the roof and into the neighbor’s yard. I alerted the people outside, let my housemates know that there was something happening other than basketball that they could watch, and then tried to calm down enough to enjoy what was occurring.

The swarm of bees moved to a lilac bush less than ten feet from the garage and began slowly alighting on a branch about three feet off the ground. My bees were becoming an immense presence in my neighbor’s yard, and I wasn’t sure how she would feel about it. I was torn between the pleasure I felt watching them and the responsibility of having introduced these insects to the neighborhood.

The truth, though, is that they had found me. These particular bees had moved into an empty hive after its previous tenants had failed to survive the winter. Perhaps they were a swarm that a nearby keeper had lost. Anyway, they found my hive for their new life, and this was their third summer on my garage roof. They were the sweetest and most gentle bees I had ever encountered, an opinion shared by many friends. Even the state bee inspector had commented on their gentle nature.

And now my friends and neighbors were having an intimate experience with my buzzing buddies. When bees are flourishing to the point of overcrowding, the hive divides. Now, approximately half my hive – 10,000 to 15,000 bees – had settled into a clump on the lilac tree. The books say that bees are safest to handle when they are swarming, since their bellies are full of honey and they are focused

on finding a new home. I let the neighbors know this fact, but I also cautioned them to not get in the way.

I knew that a competent beekeeper was supposed to capture the swarm and establish another hive. It had been a few years since I read how to do this, and I was moving more slowly than normal because of a broken toe that had not been in a shoe for over three weeks.

I called every beekeeper I could think of in the city and received recorded messages instead of the advice I needed. I knew that the swarm could leave at any moment and that if I was going to be the competent beekeeper I wanted to be I had to move fast.

Once the swarm alights near the original hive, scouts are sent out to look for a new home. The process could take minutes, hours or days. Once the home is found the bees fly to their new abode and move in. That is, unless a beekeeper intercedes and offers them a new home first.

I decided to offer them a tempting hive.

My friend Jesse bravely joined me in putting on veils and long pants. We set up a hive body with a few frames of comb that I had extracted honey from last fall, and some of the raw honey left from that process.

At that point we left the bees pretty much alone, except for a few visits to them with friends and neighbors who stopped over to see them. I decided to go on with my evening plans, figuring the swarm would either accept my humble box or be gone by the time I returned.

In case they did accept, I called and found a home for them at the farm near Dexter that was being used for the Community Supported Agriculture project. This meant that my bees would help pollinate the crops being grown for over 200 families. I didn't want to have two hives in the city, and that seemed like a great location.

When I got back at ten-thirty that evening all was quiet. The bees had neither accepted the hive nor moved; they were still clustered on the branch. They didn't seem to notice my flashlight on them and seemed content, but I was concerned. A frost was predicted for the evening.

My sleep that night was full of bees. I heard them buzzing, felt them on my arms, made plans with them, and talked to people about their beauty and dedication to the hive. I awoke feeling that I had barely slept, and I felt their presence more strongly than before.

Sunday morning I tried again to find help, at least with the practical issue of moving a heavy and awkward box filled with perhaps 15,000 bees that could not under any circumstances be dropped! And me with a broken toe and having to wear something on that toe to do it!

But it was a long weekend, and phone answering machines and skeptical friends were all I reached.

A hive is constructed of a bottom board, a series of boxes with sides but no bottoms or tops, and nine or ten frames that fit inside each box. A foundation of pressed beeswax is fastened to each frame, which guides the bees to create uniform

cells on a straight plane. These cells hold the honey and pollen or the eggs laid by the queen. The hive is topped by an inner cover and an outer cover, for air circulation and protection from rain and snow. This arrangement also hopefully excludes animals that might be tempted to raid the hive for honey and wax.

I had five frames left from last year, so I fastened foundation to them and then nailed together a bottom board. Strips of 1 by 1 are usually fastened on three edges of the bottom board, so that the hive box is raised high enough off the bottom board that the bees can swiftly crawl in and out of the fourth side. I securely tacked the bottom board and the hive body together so that they could be safely carried as one unit.

Then I started stapling pieces of string around the bottom board and up the sides of the hive body so that I could tie the top on quickly and easily once the bees were in. I closed off the normal bee entrance with another piece of loose 1 by 1 that was about an inch short, and stuffed fresh grass in the space left. The whole thing would be easy to pull out once the hive was set in its new location. Hopefully, once the cover was in place, no bees would get out during the drive to Dexter.

The lunacy of trying to get 15,000 bees to do what I wanted them to do was very apparent to me just then. I went to my books looking for assurance, almost hoping that the bees would take off on their own before I was ready.

I was thrilled to discover that my favorite bee book, "The How to Do It Book of Beekeeping" by Richard Taylor had a chapter on "How to Stop Worry and Anxiety About Swarming". I sat on the floor and read it and found it so soothing that I read it again – out loud. It was only one paragraph, and this is how it began "The first step is to get your spirit in tune with nature". Yes, that was what I was missing. Bees have always swarmed in the spring; it is part of their nature. It increases the number of beehives, and it cures overcrowding in a single hive. They know what they're doing. This was a part of nature I was experiencing. There is no difference if they are alone in the countryside or being watched on a branch less than a mile from downtown.

Bees are wild creatures that stay for a time and then move on. I would only be able to continue to work with them if I understood and worked with their nature. No way could I get 15,000 bees into a box without their cooperation and agreement!

The chapter ended with this reminder: "Nature goes her way, there is no need to fight her, and certainly no inward rebellion of your reason and will is going to make any difference except to your own serenity". I breathed more easily and went outside to get into my suit and veil.

I felt confident and calm as I started the smoker and assembled the equipment in front of the swarm. With my neighbor's permission (I asked her indulgence with a jar of last year's honey in hand for her) I cut away the branches that blocked my good view, cut off the branch that the majority of bees were on, and dropped the mass into the hive body I had so carefully prepared for them.

Never in my life have I heard such a noise as the bees made as they fell into the box. Thousands took wing as the branch dropped, rising in a column that was moving and active in front of my veil. The buzzing became a roar that reverberated in my ears. I heard it for days afterward, and would look around to see if there was a swarm of bees approaching.

My rational mind was saying "Leave! Now!" Ignoring the impulse, I stayed to watch the bees settle in quickly. Their buzzing returned to a more normal pitch. I was overwhelmed with awe. The thrill sent shivers through my body and I was near tears.

I rested the lid on the box, leaving just enough room for the last flying bees to enter easily. When the sun had nearly set and the stragglers had joined the mass, I slid the lid closed, tied the cover in place, and carefully carried the buzzing box to the back of my pick up truck. On a peaceful and beautiful evening, as the sky turned from dark blue to black, we drove slowly and gently along Huron River Drive to the farm.

Printing history: Originally printed in The Ann Arbor Observer, (Ann Arbor, MI, Ann Arbor Observer Company) August 1989
Revised October 2011

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