

The Traveling Beekeeper



More Visits With California Beekeepers

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During my California visit in March I was able to visit hobby beekeepers with very different stories to tell. The first was Janet Bisson of Grass Valley, California. I met Janet at the Austin ABF meeting last January. She had a display of screened bottom boards at a vendor booth at the trade show. We entered into conversation and by the end of the meeting Janet had extracted from me a commitment to visit California.

Janet is active in the Nevada County (CA) beekeepers Association, and works with Randy Oliver, who has authored a series of articles in this publication. Janet is constantly referring to Randy as a source of information, but she has no difficulty expressing her own opinion. In fact, Janet is a strong speaking woman with a large head of white hair and an



The organic farm is located about 2,500 feet above sea level, but it seems to be the nature of California to have extensive microclimates that ignore obvious features such as elevation. In the first week of March the garden was well underway for the season, even if a snowfall covered it just a week earlier.



A huge pussy willow provided much desired pollen for the bees on a beautiful California morning in late winter.

extremely engaging personality.

Over 30 years ago Janet worked in southern California in real estate, and there she obtained the financial means to set aside enough funds to provide her with a very modest income. Her husband did the same thing, and they purchased a farm in the Grass Valley area and established an organic garden.

They experienced success in the organic gardening field, and have lectured on various aspects of this growing form of agriculture. They raise worms on the debris of their farm and the neighbor's horses, raise their own chickens to produce high value eggs and produce a wide range of organic produce. For years Janet and her husband

appreciated the strong role of local honey bees in their production of various fruits, berries and vegetables. But they did not keep bees until the varroa mites seriously reduced the supply of pollinators from their garden, and they decided to add apiculture to their operation. They did not advertise their honey as being organic, but the combination of an organic reputation and a loyal consumer base resulted in good sales of the sweetness from their hives.

In the past decade of beekeeping Janet has explored the value of screened bottom boards and later, sugar dusting, as non-chemical means of varroa mite control. One thing led to another and Janet and her hus-



Janet Bisson and some of her bee colonies, fitted with screened bottom boards and hardware cloth entrance reducers.



The colonies were fenced in an area to protect them from bears—the bees were actively flying.



Honey bee forager packing pollen while foraging on plum flowers.

band now make screened bottom boards, the ones she was selling at the ABF trade show. I am not an expert on hive equipment—especially screened bottom board design—but their model is clearly popular with lots of beekeepers in California and elsewhere. It has features that allow the beekeeper to sample for mite fall without interfering with the business of the bees inside the hive. I especially like a smoke feature that allows the beekeeper to add smoke without getting carried away. As I traveled in the area, I saw other beekeepers using this screened bottom board design.

For Janet and her husband, the demand for the boards has increased so much that they have someone else cut the wood for the bottom boards that they assemble and sell through various bee supply firms.

After speaking to the Nevada County Beekeepers, I was able to visit Janet the next morning. Here are some views of her organic gardens and the bees she keeps to provide pollination for the crops produced there.

Janet and I could have spent most of the day in conversation, but I had scheduled another talk with the Santa Clara Beekeeper's Guild for that evening. So, I headed toward Sacramento and on to Santa Clara, arriving with just minutes extra before meeting Bob Rice, my host for the meeting. Bob and his wife, Margaret, had offered to put me in their guest room and I was treated royally and we had a fun visit.

The Rices had build most of their home themselves some 30 years ago using old redwood barns they found in the state. The home has vast glass windows that look out



Janet's screened bottom board features an insert that may be left in the colony as a means of monitoring mite fall and other biological events in the hive. There were large numbers of ants that had found the inserts and were removing pollen and other material from it.



Part of the organic garden. Garlic has continued to grow during the winter and will be harvested in the spring.

onto the San Francisco bay area and the rugged landscape of the area. The home is at the end of a true California switchback road, and pulling into their driveway involves a leap of faith that there is roadbed to take the car to the house—I could not see anything as I took the downward plunge! And in the dark.

Bob was forced to retire 10 years ago when he turned 60. As a commercial airline pilot, he has kept a small plane for himself, and offered to take me over the almond fields in bloom, but a heavy inland fog made that exercise pointless—we wouldn't see anything. Instead we spent the morning talking bees – what else? They have one hive of bees on a small deck built for that purpose, but also had a hive they were watching for two new beekeepers they were mentoring as part of the Santa Clara Guild's program of supporting new beekeepers.

Margaret, a retired teacher, joins Bob in working with new beekeepers and spreading the word about bees. They have the retirement income to do this, and the good health to provide valuable educational services to many beekeepers. Bob has a quiet and calm demeanor, but admits he likes to hit the ski slopes and tear up the white powder with gusto.

They have developed a close relation-



Janet looks at a plum tree in bloom adjacent to the bee colonies.



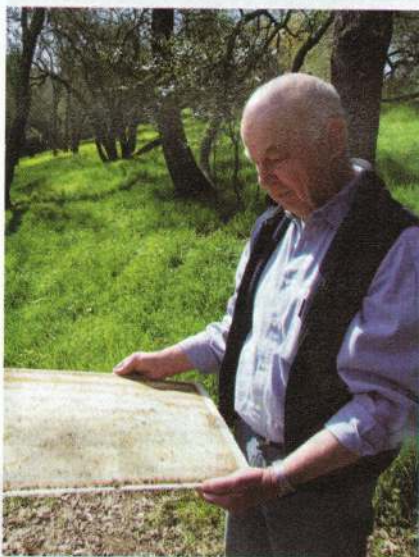
Janet and her husband spent time making and selling screened bottom boards. Janet is particularly interested in the powered sugar dusting method, combined with the screened bottom board, as a means of reducing varroa mites without using chemicals. She has worked with Randy Oliver, who has been reporting in the *American Bee Journal* on some of his work on this topic in this same area of California. Oliver has developed dusting intervals to use with screened bottom boards that provide significant varroa mite reduction.

ship with the turkey and deer of the area. In fact, if they are late putting breakfast corn out for the turkey, one of the birds will peck on the glass windows to remind them that it is meal time.

We discussed the bottom board that Janet and her husband make and sell. Bob and Margaret have one on their hive, but Bob has added "feet" to the trap to get it off the ground and coated them with Tanglefoot to keep the ants out of the colony. This little adaptation seems to work well in his location.



Bob and Margaret Rice on their deck with a hive of bees they are "keeping" for two women who are new to beekeeping. They are holding a frame covered with a photograph of the bees on a frame. They use this to show folks what it looks like inside a beehive without exposing them to bees! They obtained the photo from Santa Clara Guild member Ray Hicks, a photographer who attends many bee meetings around the country. I'd love to make up an entire hive of these photos with 'actual' frames from a real hive to show what is happening in a working hive. In my spare time, I guess. . .



Bob checks the droppings of his hive every few days, looking for varroa mites and anything. He scrapes the sheet clean and returns it to the bottom board.

The colonies are located on the balcony where Bob and Margaret carry their morning coffee or drinks in the afternoon, letting the bees fly around them. Margaret says their bees know them, and she makes a point of speaking to them every day.



Margaret talks to the bees every day. Laugh if you must, but none of us were stung while I poked my camera into some bee's eyes and they were non responsive.

Some folks may discount his behavior, but I found it charming and fitting for this wonderful setting.

As I write this it is April, and the flowers and plants and bees are just approaching the level of development in Connecticut and



This is one of Janet Bisson's bottom boards on Bob and Margaret's hive. Bob has added "legs" to get the hive off the ground. He brushed on tanglefoot to keep ants from entering the hive.

Michigan that I saw in California nearly 45 days earlier. It has been a hectic month, moving Wicwas Press and myself to Kalamazoo, just a few miles from my mother, and where the lower cost of living may help me grow my business. I left the area when I was 17, the summer before entering Michigan State.

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