

# The Traveling Beekeeper



## CATCHING SWARMS AND DOING BEE REMOVALS

by LARRY CONNOR  
Wicwas Press

1620 Miller Road, Kalamazoo, MI 49001  
LJConnor@aol.com • www.wicwas.com

*Lots of new beekeepers and many small-scale beekeepers remove swarms every season as a means of obtaining lower cost bees (they are never 'free'), and a certain number of them do bee removals, often called 'cut-outs' of colonies that are established in trees, buildings and other structures.*

### Swarms

**S**warm removal sounds easy. You simply drive up to a newly landed swarm, shake the bees off the branch and into a box, seal up the box, and drive home where you will dump the bees in front of an empty bee hive body.

Swarm removal, in reality, can be much more complicated. You may need to use a ladder or even a cherry picker to reach the swarm. There is a good chance that the swarm may fly to a permanent location between the time you get the call and the time you get into the car or truck and arrive on

the site. Sometimes the swarms are really small, and not worth the fuel to drive to pickup the bees. Then, you charge that up to being a good member of the beekeeping community.

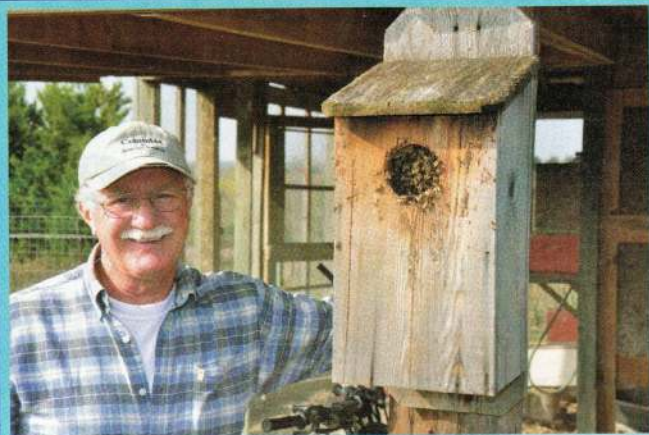
If you have never done a swarm removal before, it is not difficult. If you obtain good, secure access to the swarm it is just a matter of shaking (or brushing) the bees AND THE QUEEN(S) into the box or container.

We define a swarm by the queen that goes with it. If a colony leaves with the mother queen (the one that went through the winter), we call it a Prime Swarm (usually just

the old queen, but sometimes daughter queens fly when Mother cannot join them due to injury or some other factor). It is often the largest and will range from 8,000 to 20,000 or more bees, the equivalent of one or three packages of bees. The parent colony has sealed swarm queen cells that will produce unmated queens that will not fight until the decision is made to produce an After Swarm. Colonies average about one and a half swarms per year, so there is a pretty good chance that an after swarm will be issued and will carry many virgin queens with it. These queens fight to determine the



(l) Shirley and Horacio's backyard apiary, mainly of bees removed from buildings and swarms.  
(r) Bee swarm in grill. About 80% of the bees are defensive. These colonies are not kept.



(l) Horacio with one of the many birdhouses he and Shirley have removed because they are filled with bees. (r) Entrance of birdhouse hive, showing bees and comb inside.

winner only after the swarm has entered its final nesting spot. After swarms are smaller, 4,000 to 10,000 bees and often have multiple queens. When I captured a swarm at the Farm, I got one or more queens, but left some behind. It was a large swarm and what I got was a good colony. But part of the swarm reformed on the tree with an uncaptured virgin and flew away after a few days and is established within the neighborhood. The swarm was at the top of an old apple tree and we could get the bed of the truck into the maze of brush to work, but not comfortably.

#### Container used for swarm catching

If you can lift a nucleus box, cardboard nucleus box, or an empty box of most any sort, this is fine for shaking/brushing bees into. Many of us have left the office after getting a swarm call, grabbing a copy paper box from the copy room with a sliding lid. These are great for catching swarms—in a pinch—since the lid can be gently slid back onto the box and air holes punched with a hive tool to provide air until the bees can be installed back in the apiary.

There are amazingly elaborate boxes in the literature and on the market for catching swarms. Some incorporate vacuum cleaner devices to suck the bees out of the trees and into the box. You certainly can have a lot of fun with these devices, and may become quite proficient at swarm catching by using one, especially swarms high off the ground.

#### Cost of swarm removal

If the swarms are free, how can they have a cost associated with them? If I drive an hour to get a swarm in a work truck, take off time from work, buy special equipment, and bring a buddy along who needs to stop for food and drink—these are costs. So swarm bees are not really free, but you know they are less expensive than other methods of starting new hives. Finally, you can charge for swarm removal and learn that PEOPLE WILL PAY TO GET RID OF FLYING STINGING INSECTS. Current rates seem to be in the \$50 to \$100 range. If people do

not want to pay, you can give them the name of a new beekeeper, a teenager perhaps, who will do this for nothing and for the experience.

#### Care of swarms

I use the biological method of introducing swarms into a new home. I shake the bees at the entrance, perhaps on an old bed sheet, so all the bees, including the queens, walk into the cavity. I place frames of drawn comb, a frame of food (pollen and honey) and foundation in the hive so the bees will like what they find when they crawl inside. The bees seem to like being shaken at the entrance better than dumped into the hive and sealed up. Often swarms on foundation fly away because they don't approve of the new home you picked for them. The behavior of walking into the hive is an important piece of biology, as it seems to complete the swarming instinct behavior.

Feed swarms with one to one sugar syrup for several weeks to a month. This will continue their instinctive urge of build beeswax comb. They will start foraging for pollen and nectar almost as soon as they arrive in the box, so a source of carbohydrate is excellent and will stimulate more pollen foragers and rapid brood buildup.

Once the colony is established, examine it carefully for any problems and then put it into your production cycle within the apiary.

#### Advantages of swarms

Swarms carry honey in the stomachs of the bees. This is digested to produce beeswax. A strong swarm can produce a full box of comb in a few days, more if fed sugar syrup. Swarms usually come from vigorous hives, and can be a real asset.

#### Risks of swarms

There is a small but statistically significant chance that swarms will carry spores of American foulbrood in the honey in their stomachs. Some beekeepers put antibiotics into the sugar syrup as a preventative. I simply watch the brood combs very carefully for any appearance of any diseases and

eliminate the swarm if I see Foulbrood or other problems.

In more parts of the country than in the past the risk of capturing swarms that carry African genes or are entirely African is growing rapidly. Sunbelt areas are particularly at risk, but areas in the country with a huge influx of migratory beekeepers from these areas increases the risk of getting African bees or genes into your apiary. Watch for any signs of defensive behavior and remove or requeen the colony as needed.

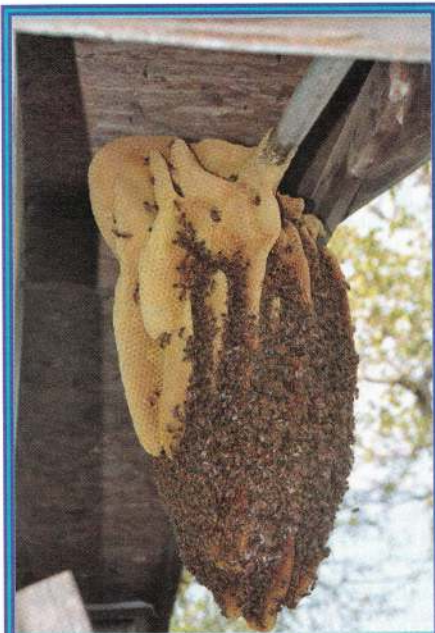
Swarm catching by using bait hives is a popular method for swarm detection and removal, especially in areas of African bees. The beekeepers work under contract to manage a series of bait hives and weekly visit the hives to check for swarms. If found, the swarms are destroyed. This is often used in public areas: golf courses, playgrounds, retirement communities, campgrounds, amusement parks, etc. These services are potentially profitable when well managed.

#### Bee Removals

When swarms are not captured by a beekeeper, they enter empty bee tree cavities, the sides of buildings and other spaces. When these are near humans they create a potential risk and the property owner will pay for their removal. These bee removals are also called 'cut-outs' by beekeepers since the bees must be cut out of the walls of a building.

In some parts of the country bee removals are an important source of income for many small-scale beekeepers. They see the removal of these bees as a source of bees and their stored honey (selling this honey in special containers and at a higher price). They also see these bees as a source of good genetic information, as survivors, and want to test the daughters of these queens in their apiary. (In my opinion there is no guarantee that these bees possess any special genetic traits, but there is no reason not to produce daughters from these colonies and test them).

Bee removals are work. Beekeepers



Once the colony builds comb, it will not leave to go to another site. With the cold winters of Northern Texas, these colonies may not survive in the wild, unless protected by vegetation or buildings.

doing this sort of work have a flat fee or a minimum fee and go up from there. The fee

per nest may be \$250 and higher. When I was visiting St. Croix, a group of beekeepers were removing four colonies from one concrete block wall, and charging for each colony. This is an important source of bees on the Island, and while the bees are African, the comb pieces are wired onto the frame and managed for honey production.

Beekeepers talented in both colony removal and structural carpentry can do very well with the cut out business, and build their colony holdings. This is a great source of income during a slow construction economy.

#### A Small-Scale Removal Operation

In November of last year I visited with Shirley and Horacio Acevedo in Princeton, Texas. Horacio retired in 2000 from Texas Instruments after 28 years with the company. The couples' interest in beekeeping began when they were working for Texas Instruments in El Salvador where they met an old farmer who kept bees on the roof of his house. In their 'retirement' the couple does hundreds of swarm removals and cut-outs a year, taking the bees back to their apiary and harvesting the honey. They charge for their services, even for swarm removal (\$50 to \$200 for swarm removal, \$300 to \$800 for removal of feral colonies from buildings, depending on the distance from their home and the difficulty of removing bees).

They have traveled 100 miles one way for removals. If a potential client does not want to pay for the swarm removal, they turn

them toward a young member of the Collin County Hobby Bee Club who will do the removal for nothing.

More and more, the bees in their North Texas area are getting "excessively aggressive." They report that five years ago about 80% of the colonies were gentle, and now only 20% are kept for their own apiary behind their home in Princeton. The aggressive colonies are allowed to fly free when they arrive home. They do not bring in any other bee stock.

They sell honey and other hive products at local festivals, where people seek out their very dark honey. They have four children, but none of them are interested in keeping bees. They do not use any pesticides on their bees other than moth crystals for stored comb protection. They let their bees requeen and swarm as is their nature. Most of the time they do not feed their bees, but will feed a fall swarm with honey in a Boardman feeder.

Acevedo, Shirley and Horacio  
10717 CR 1114  
Princeton TX 75407  
[www.acebees.com](http://www.acebees.com)

Interested in learning Queen Rearing? Why not attend one of Dr. Connor's classes? Check [www.wicwas.com](http://www.wicwas.com) for classes with openings for June and July. And check out *Queen Rearing Essentials*, available from the website or your favorite bee book seller.

## WEAVER'S famous QUEENS

★ Buckfast & ★ All-American

OVER 121 YEARS OF SERVICE

Visit us online at: [www.rweaver.com](http://www.rweaver.com)

The R Weaver Apiaries, Inc.

16495 C.R. 319, Navasota, TX 77868

Phone: 936.825.2333

Fax: 936.825.3642

Email: [rweaver@rweaver.com](mailto:rweaver@rweaver.com) Website: [www.rweaver.com](http://www.rweaver.com)

## SIMPSON'S BEE SUPPLY

Classic Glass & Plastic Jars

PIERCO Frames

New Honey Filled Candy

15642 Tiger Valley Road • Danville, OH 43014

740.599.7914

[cwsimpson@embarqmail.com](mailto:cwsimpson@embarqmail.com)  
[www.simpsonsbeesupply.com](http://www.simpsonsbeesupply.com)

Call Now For 2010 Queens!

Cypress Supers - All Sizes & More

**WE DELIVER**

## QUEENS & POLLINATION

Minnesota, Hygenic Italians

USDA mite-resistant queens with

Varroa Sensitive Hygiene

# HARRIS APIARIES

(530) 368-6293

[harrisapiaries@yahoo.com](mailto:harrisapiaries@yahoo.com)

P.O. Box 345 • Meadow Vista, CA 95722

## MILLER BEE SUPPLY

888-848-5184

[WWW.MILLERBEESUPPLY.COM](http://WWW.MILLERBEESUPPLY.COM)  
[WOODNWAX@EMBARQMAIL.COM](mailto:WOODNWAX@EMBARQMAIL.COM)

496 YELLOW BANKS ROAD ~ NORTH WILKESBORO, NC 28659