Bee School recap by Dewey M. Caron

At the SOBA Bee School mid-April I started our program by discussing bees, bee hives, apiaries and some basics of feeling comfortable around bees. It is not the bee race (mostly we have a selected Italian bee available in the US), the bee hive (Langstroth removable comb or fixed comb top bar/warre hive) or bee source (hives can be started by buying packages, nucs, by splitting (dividing) an existing colony or with a captured swarm) but our attention to basic colony care , feeding and effective mite control that will ultimately make the difference in whether our new colony will grow in population, draw comb, raise enough brood and prosper through the spring and summer and become strong enough to overwinter until next spring.

This has been the spring to start colonies by hiving a swarm. The mild winter meant fewer overwintering losses (I will have our OSU annual overwintering survivorship report soon after analyzing the April survey results), together with our mild spring, which has provided abundant pollen and nectar foraging conditions, has resulted in numbers of swarms. Reports of colonies swarming more than once have been common.

For beekeepers, swarms represent a good opportunity to start a new colony, especially if the swarm is not from one of your hives. They are “free” bees. Like a new package or nuc hive, swarms (and hive splits) can benefit from beekeeper attention to improve their chances of overwintering successfully. Early swarms and bigger-sized swarms have the best survivability odds but using smaller swarms to bolster weaker overwintered colonies or putting several swarms together to develop a stronger colony are all welcome apiary additions in the spring.

One unique feature of a swarm-capture developed colony is they are going to have a queen issue to resolve. Primary swarms (first swarms to issue from a colony), have the older, original hive queen. Original queens will soon be superseded. Once hived, some will not properly requeen, ending up queenless. Afterswarms or secondary swarms may have multiple virgin queens and will not be queenright (i.e. have mated laying queen) for 2 or more weeks. Some of the earliest hive-swarms result in no or poor virgin queen mating due to variable spring weather and lack of sufficiently large enough drone populations.

As appliers of bee biology, we recognize that swarming is colony reproduction – one family becomes two (or more) when the parent colony swarms. Reproduction is basic to living organisms. Good bee stewardship includes reducing the possibility of our colonies swarming. Realistically however we must recognize we are dealing with basic reproduction. Additionally since we lack good clues that a colony is preparing to swarm until they have started (and often are well into) swarming preparations, our success in halting swarming is and remains a big challenge.

Early springs such as this one represent both the challenges of stopping swarming and the opportunities or hiving swarms to make new colonies. I hope you have more of the latter and fewer issues with the former. For all those newbees attending the SOA Bee School good luck this season and be sure to visit the club bees before the meetings to continue learning how to master them and prosper in your new beekeeping adventure.