

Honey Bee Swarms ...

... some useful information about an amazing phenomenon



Swarming is the honeybee's natural means of reproduction. One colony will split into two, three, or sometimes more. There is a transitional stage, where the bees will send out "scouts" to look for a suitable permanent location, this can take anything from a few minutes, to several hours. This is when you may see bees "hanging-up" in a tree or bush in your garden.

Before leaving their hive, the bees gorge themselves with honey, carrying as much as they can with them to help in setting up their new home. When they are full of honey, they are at their most placid. Also, at the time when they are clustered on a tree or shrub, they have no home to defend, and no brood to protect, so they are not in defensive mode. Their only interest is in finding a new home.

What they are looking for is a dark cavity, big enough to house them, and offering protection from the weather and predators. This may be a hollow tree, a cavity wall, a space under roofing tiles, or an unused chimney.

If the swarm is hanging in a cluster in the garden, then a beekeeper can remove them without a great deal of difficulty, but if they have entered a building, it is then usually beyond the ability of most beekeepers. Specialist equipment may be required and then there is the risk of damage to property, and the associated insurance implications. This then becomes a task for the local Environmental Health Services. Before calling out anyone however, it is necessary to establish what sort of insects we are dealing with.

Is it a Honeybee?



A honeybee is about the same size as a wasp, but brown in colour. They form large colonies, and can take up residence in tree hollows, under roofing tiles, and in unused chimneys. On a fine day, dozens will be seen coming and going usually through a single entrance. They exist as a colony through winter as well as summer, and if left alone pose very little threat. When in a swarming cluster, they can be removed by a beekeeper.

Or a Wasp?



Wasps are bright yellow. They build nests usually in the ground, but sometimes under roof tiles or in sheds. The wasp's nest is made from a very delicate papery material, made from wood scrapings. Wasps live as a colony varying from a few dozen to several hundred, and can be seen coming and going through the entrance just a few at a time. In the autumn, the wasps die, leaving only newly mated queens to hibernate and start a new colony the following spring, usually in a new location.

A colony of wasps does not usually pose a threat if left alone, but they can be a

nuisance if they get into the house. If destruction is necessary, the local Pest Control Officer should be called in.

A Bumblebee?



Bumblebees come in a range of sizes and markings, but they can usually be distinguished by their round, hairy bodies, and loud buzz. Only the queens survive through winter to start a new colony each spring. They usually nest at ground level, in the base of hedgerows, or under stones, or in compost heaps and often making use of an abandoned mouse's nest. Numbers rarely reach a hundred, usually much less, and if the entrance is observed, little activity can be seen, individuals coming and going one at a time. Extremely valuable as pollinators, bumblebees are rarely known to sting, and if possible, their nest site should be protected.

Or a Solitary Bee?



These are harmless bees, which, as the name suggests, lead solitary existences. Mated females over-winter and in the spring, excavate tunnels in the ground, or in hollow twigs or old masonry walls, depending on the species. They provision the tunnels with pollen onto which they lay an egg. When the tunnel is fully provisioned, it is sealed, and the bee's job is done. Solitary bees pose no threat at all, and, like bumble bees, should be protected wherever possible.

Most types of bee have been in considerable decline in recent years, with some species even becoming extinct so destruction of any bees should therefore be considered, only as a last resort.

If you have an accessible swarm of honeybees you would like a beekeeper to remove please contact Tom Robinson, email: mautomrobee@talktalk.net.