

BEE SWARMS ON GIVONS GROVE - 25th April 2021

The swarming season for honey bees is fast approaching (May/June). This year it could be early with reports already of swarms in East Surrey. The first sign a member of the public will see is a large cluster of bees a couple of meters above the ground in a tree or something similar. It can be quite disconcerting having a writhing mass of thousands of bees the size of a football and sending out a loud humming sound in your garden. However, left undisturbed they present little threat to human beings – in fact swarming bees rarely sting. In past years, there has been on average of 4-6 such sightings on Givons Grove each spring/early summer.

I am a qualified beekeeper and a registered swarm collector with Reigate Beekeepers Association (RBKA). If you see a swarm and want help or advice please contact me on 01372 372 535 or 07775 821931 (you can leave a message if I do not answer) and I will be happy to come round and have a look. I can normally collect a swarm myself but have access to more experienced swarm collectors if needed. You can also contact me if you notice other signs of bee activity and are uncertain of what to do.

Geoff Pye

For those wanting to know more about swarms I offer a short summary below.

Bee Swarms – a short summary

Honey bees live in a colony. There is 1 Queen: thousands of Worker bees (female) and, in early/mid summer a hundred or so Drones (males). Numbers in a colony vary according to the season with about 10,000 in winter growing to about 50,000 in summer in a healthy colony. Swarming is the colony's way of reproducing.

As numbers of worker bees grow in Spring and early summer, the colony also brings on several new queens. When these new queens are about to hatch, the old queen decides the colony will be in good hands and flies off to find a new home (the swarm). She swarms with half the bees (about 10,000 – 15,000 bees) leaving the remainder in the existing hive. The swarm does not fly far (typically 10 to 100 meters) and gathers in a tree: on a post: on a building etc about 3 meters from the ground forming the writhing mass of bees mentioned above. This is a temporary staging post – the swarm will stay there a few days whilst the colony finds a new home. The colony sends out 'scout' bees to find a suitable place for a permanent home (in the wild this will be a hole in a tree or in a garden shed roof – anywhere dark with a narrow entrance). The scout bees return to the colony and start arguing who has found the best location – leading to other scout bees going to take a look. Eventually the scout bees reach a consensus on which place is best, send a signal to the queen, and the whole colony flies off in a torpedo shaped swarm to their new home.

Meanwhile, in the old hive the new queens hatch and one will fly off to get mated. All the drones from miles around gather in a place high in the air and new queens from local colonies find their way to this location and mate with as many drones as they can. Interestingly, these mating locations seem to be the same every year. Once mated the new queen returns to the colony and starts where the old queen left off. She will not mate again and has sufficient fertilised eggs to lay hundreds of eggs every day for several years.