

Groups

A co-operative approach to conservation and improvement

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Beekeeping is so often practised on a solitary basis with the beekeeper sometimes struggling to carry out operations because of physical or time limitations. How much better for two people to work together and make it easier to lift heavy supers and brood boxes as well as covering absences due to holidays, illness and the like. In any case, two people can bounce ideas off each other and an extra pair of eyes may notice something which a solitary beekeeper can miss – especially that extra queen during supersedure! It is noticeable that over the last ten years how many of my students have formed beekeeping partnerships and seem to get more enjoyment out of their hobby without worrying as to whether they will have time to carry out necessary operations on time. In some of these partnerships the beekeeping has evolved into queen raising. Such partnerships may then be the beginning of a possible Breeding Group.

So what is a Breeding Group? Essentially it is two or more people with a common purpose in producing *good quality* mated queens. The Group shares all tasks such as routine operations, assessment, records, selection, drone production, grafting, nuclei maintenance, starter and finisher colonies etc. However, dependent on the number of participants, a Group may be classified as small or large.

A small Group will include two to four individuals who will undertake all the necessary tasks. On the Continent there are many such Groups sometimes producing as many as 3,000 queens a year. Often Germany farmers have relatively tiny small-holdings necessitating them to supplement their income by perhaps working in a nearby factory but a few find queen rearing an interesting and profitable alternative.

A large Group with say more than five members allows specialisation and so can exploit the varied experience of the members. For example, novice beekeepers who have successfully completed the BBKA's Introductory Course adapt quickly to a simple tasks such as "charging" Apideas or routine feeding. Beginning in this way it does not take long before they are able to undertake some of the more technical work. Experienced members are then able to concentrate on the more demanding tasks such as grafting, banking and the like. By specialising on a specific task each individual can raise their skill levels and be more productive. Because they are part of a team they enjoy the companionship and learn from each other. It is surprising how quickly relative newcomers start inserting cells or marking and clipping. However some prefer to specialise solely in one activity such as record keeping or morphometry. I know a married couple in one Group who only want to charge and

maintain the Apideas much to the delight of the other members. As experience and numbers build up it becomes possible for the Group to consider instrumental insemination and microscopical examination for parasites such as Nosema and Acarine.

So what options does a Group have when deciding how they will organise its queen rearing and mating. There are two possible approaches but these are dependent on the Group having a mating apiary. The first option is for a member or members to produce virgin queens in their own apiaries and then transport the queens in mini-nucs or nuclei to the mating apiary for mating with the selected drones. The advantage of this approach is that individual cell raisers with colonies in their gardens or nearby can more easily keep to the necessary timetable constraints. However, it does have a number of possible drawbacks as it makes it possible for undesirable drones to be accidentally introduced at the mating site as well as the danger of transporting disease. The second option is to produce the queens on the mating site but again this is not perfect as it will mean siting more colonies and increase the amount of travelling. Choices are difficult but one Group compromises by producing queens on site but also allows members to bring some of their home-produced virgin queens for mating. The same Group has extended this offer on a limited basis to another Breeding Group.

One of the most difficult questions for a Group is deciding where to site its Breeding Apiary. The immediate reaction is that it is impossible to find an isolated sited within reasonable travelling distance. A careful examination of a map (especially one showing contours) is invaluable in researching the possibilities. As a result of this several English sites have been established in the Peaks, the Pennines, the Isle of Sheppey amongst others and similar situations are found in Wales, Scotland both parts of Ireland. Techniques such as drone flooding and late mating can make a relatively insecure sight useable. The latter is only possible if *A.m.mellifera* is used in say an *A.m.ligustica* area – *sp. mellifera* flies at lower temperatures and is thought at lower altitudes as well as usually holding its drones later into the season. It is important to persuade any beekeepers within a few miles to regularly re-queen with the Group's queens. The question of forage should always be taken into account; if there are insufficient flows of nectar and especially pollen near the Apiary site then artificial feeding will be required at all times. The Breeding Apiary should have at least four drone colonies containing the highest scoring queens. Finally, keep the location of the site as secret as possible – unfortunately there are more thieves around than we care to acknowledge. My own Group's main site is fortunately secured by gates, heavy hedging plus CCTV and a 24 hour caretaker but we once had queens stolen at an Open Day.

When forming a Breeding group it is essential that all involved are quite clear and transparent in what they want to do and achieve. There must be agreement. Otherwise disaster looms. Two examples of what can happen is where one Group elected a new Chairman who first decision was to abandon the isolated mating site (as he felt it cost too

much time and money) and instead to produce “commercial” (scrub?) queens locally. A member of another Group in his capacity as the local Association Chairman announced to his local Association that he was arranging as a service to its members the bulk purchase of “Buckfast” queens – this in dark bee area. It is important that Group members are transparent and honest and should have some knowledge and acceptance of each other’s approaches to beekeeping. In this context it is very important for the more experienced to educate other members in for example the differences between the various sub specie.

Every Group develops different ways of working but again the system must be agreed by consensus. Small Group members will probably each carry out the necessary tasks. As already indicated, large groups will have specialists for each task. Who does what will be decided by individual preference, skills, availability and Group requirements but it is important that individual members if they wish are allowed vary their jobs.

There is one requirement that can give rise to discord and that is commitment. Each member must be ready to assist the Group in following its timetable. A large Group can help in this respect by having weekday teams and weekend teams. There is no place for someone who merely wishes to use the Group to obtain queens or knowledge or aggrandisement. What is difficult is when a Group relies on just a few of its members to undertake most of the work. Once the Group is established it should be open to new people but admittance should only be with the agreement of all its existing members.

The ongoing success of the Group depends very much on communication but frequent meetings are an enormous “turn-off” as most beekeepers worthy of the name prefer doing rather than talking. However occasional planning and review meetings are essential – it helps if a Group has a rota of members to take turn in hosting such meetings. All breeding timetables should be circulated to members. A log book must be kept at the Mating Site so that the work at each visit is recorded. Other information such as morphometry, breeding and assessment results should be circulated, preferably by email. Everyone must understand the importance of keeping and maintaining accurate records. Galtee as the largest group even produces its own magazine which puts most other beekeeping publications to shame.

Often when a Group is first established, equipment is loaned or donated; this should be documented so as to avoid any dissention later. The Group once established should be self-funding by subscription, donations and queen sales. Other funding may be possible from such sources such as local Authorities, conservation groups, commercial organisations (“Co-op” and “Land Tax”) and even local beekeeping associations. On the bee farm where my own Group has its mating apiary an observation hive is maintained and alongside it there is an explanation of the importance of the dark bee plus a donation box.

Beekeeping so often seems to be the refuge of those with political ambitions who have been unsuccessful in other spheres. "Barrack room" lawyers also seem to be a feature of beekeeping organisations. Constitutions seem to be a catalyst for such individuals and so the temptation is to avoid them. However, a *simple* Agreement or Understanding helps in order that everyone understands where they stand. The accompanying illustration shows such an Agreement used very successfully for many years by a large Group.

In order to avoid any possible conflict or unpleasantness, it is important to establish some sort of rapport with the local Association or Associations otherwise there may be accusations of splitting, rivalry or division. Unfortunately, some Association officials are very sensitive to losing direct control over beekeepers and beekeeping activities in the area which they regard as their fiefdom.

So having described what a Group is and how it may operate there is an outstanding question. Members give time and effort but what do they get in return? Obviously, it must be the satisfaction of conserving and improving our native bee. Their tangible reward is receiving queens for their own use. My own Group supplies two queens each year to each active or full member (subscribing) and two queens to each associate (non-active but subscribing) member. All further queens are shared between full members and any surplus can be sold. An important proviso is that all those who receive queens must keep a record in a form required by the Group and these records must be available at the end of the Season for review. The Group retains the right to take grafts from any high scoring queens.

Sadly, over the years, many successful breeding operations have disappeared when the breeder has died. A Breeding Group overcomes this difficulty and provides continuity. However, a word of warning; a Group dominated by one personality can end up the same way and so it is vital that leadership is shared and all members skills are developed.

Hopefully you will now go ahead and form a Group. All that has been described is based on the experience of my mainly my own Group but also some others. In my Group's early years much very useful advice was given by Albert Knight and Micheál Mac Giolla Coda without which it would have been difficult to conceive of any success. As part of my lecture programme over the years I have been very privileged to explain the importance of Groups and this has encouraged some Groups to be organised – this article has been influenced by the feed-back that I have received. Groups are the bed-rock of BIBBA. It is only with a network of Groups that BIBBA's aims and objectives can be furthered.

BIBBA have an active Group Secretary who would be delighted to hear from any new or existing Group. His contact details are Jo Widdecomb (email groups@bibba.com)

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