

## **Report from Fermanagh Beekeepers Association Autumn and Early Winter 2024.**

In the last report from Fermanagh Beekeepers Association (August 2024) the aftermath of our poor summer on our honeybees and on the honey crop, was under scrutiny while we prepared our bees for winter with the usual optimism of beekeepers that 'next year will be better'! The first weeks of September gave us cause to believe that such optimism was justified as our bees flew out in the warm, sunny, albeit shorting, days to collect whatever pollen and nectar they could find. The absence of pollen in hives is critical at any time of year as it impacts on the volume of brood which can be reared and, in autumn, colonies are rearing 'winter' bees to replace those worn out by their summer exertions and those winter bees have to live and maintain the viability of the colony until the days lengthen, the queen is laying more prolifically and spring has finally arrived. The late pollen from the despised Himalayan balsam, bramble, other bits and pieces of late bloom and the commencement of the much anticipated flow from the ivy, which includes an abundance of pollen, was welcomed by both bees and beekeepers.

Since the end of September, the weather has varied but our tough bees have foraging out for cleansing flights when temperatures permit. I am always a bit concerned to see too many bees flying during winter as it means that they are using precious energy stores from both that stored as honey in the frames and in their fat bodies, shortening their lives and threatening the survival of colonies in spring.

By the beginning of January any necessary treatment for *Varroa* control should have been administered and our role is now to continue hefting the hives to determine whether or not the bees have enough stores. Hefting is something of a mystery to those new to beekeeping but, with experience, it becomes a useful tool. The frequency should be increased in January because, as the egg laying by the queen increases, so does the consumption of stores. If hives feel light, and again the accuracy of the judgement of this increases with practice, fondant should be fed as it is accessible to the bees without too much movement from the cluster and its life saving warmth. Also it is not stored in the cells, thus the brood nest will not become clogged, restricting the queen's laying area. Sugar syrup should not be given to the bees at this time of year. Bees have to leave the cluster, ingest the cold syrup, process it and place it in the cells, expending energy and reducing laying space.

Fermanagh Beekeepers Association winter programme started with a review of the progress of the Wild Bee Project by David Bolton and Andrew Elliott spoke of his experiences of beekeeping in the Lake District. We continued in October with a talk on disease by Jackie Barry which evoked many questions and much discussion.



Members of the beekeeping class of 2024 with Jackie Barry.



Joanna Langham receives the plaque for Beginner Beekeeper of the year 2023-2024 from Jackie Barry.

The November meeting included a presentation by Donal Quinn on his method of preparing ivy honey for sale. The Level 1 students were presented with their certificates and lapel badges by Jackie, their tutor. The class of 2024 is to be congratulated as 24 students started the course and 24 completed the course. Some members of the class described to the meeting, their experiences during the course, including aspects which they had not expected such as the raised awareness of their local environment and the other pollinators in it. There was time for questions from the new beekeepers and their thirst for information was evident. The formal part of the meeting ended with the Joanna Langham receiving the plaque for Beginner Beekeeper of the year 2023-2024.

Anyone interested in taking up beekeeping and learning about bees and beekeeping should consider joining the 2025 Level 1 endorsed course which begins in February. Before getting a first colony of bees, the aspiring beekeeping should learn about how they are housed, where to place this house/hive, the natural history and life cycle of the bees etc. just as we would with any other animal we care for. This course provides all this information plus much more, including hands on work with colonies of bees. When joining, FBKA offers free membership of the Association for the year, which means a vast pool of members' experience is available to the new beekeeper to tap into when the inevitable problems arise. To obtain more information, go to the Cafre website, put 'beekeeping' into the search box and chose 'Introduction to Beekeeping' and we will look forward to meeting you in the 2025 season!

The Erne Queen Rearing group ended its year on the best evening they had all summer. The sun shone while they worked to ensure that all colonies, which had been plundered to supply the requisite materials in the form of bees, pollen and stores for the raising of queens during the many

wet dismal evenings of summer, were queenright and had large enough numbers of bees, sufficient brood and stores, and after *Varroa* treatment, to have a reasonable chance of surviving the winter. Any apideas remaining in the apiary were checked and finally the party began. It had been a successful summer in terms of the numbers of virgin queens produced but mating had been difficult for many due to the lack of sunshine and settled weather. Where mating was successful, the areas tended to have plenty of mature trees giving some protection from the north wind which seemed to prevail for all of June July and August. Many thanks are due to Brian Dane who co-ordinated the programme and was liaison officer for the group and to Thomas McCaffrey who mentored the queen rearers, explaining every stage (sometimes many times!) and ensuring that all had the opportunity to work on every aspect of queen rearing over the months. While membership of a queen rearing group is not for those without a couple of years experience of managing their own bees, it is a fantastic way to gain confidence and valuable knowledge, not only of queen rearing itself but also in observation of brood nests and correct care and handling of colonies. The Fermanagh Queen rearing group has gained the support of NIHBS for the 2025 season and anyone interested in joining should contact Brian by email at the [tebdane@btinternet.com](mailto:tebdane@btinternet.com) .

The next meeting will be the **Annual General Meeting** and it would be appreciated if as many members as possible attended – after all, it is your Association and you should have an input into how it works for our beekeepers. It will be followed by the **Annual Dinner**.

Date, time and place - **January 30<sup>th</sup> 2025 at 7.00pm in the Enniskillen Hotel**. Please note the change of both time and location. Anyone interested in coming to the Dinner should contact Andy via WhatsApp. Partners will be very welcome.