

Beekeepers emerge from winter slumber

by Matthew Wilson

BARTON — As spring approaches, the vegetation of the Northeast Kingdom rouses from winter's slumber and, for those with an interest in honeybees, the coming sunny days herald the approaching apiary work to be done. It is too soon to start gathering once more at the Old Stone House Museum, so the Brownington Beekeepers met for their first meeting at the Barton Public Library last Saturday. Members talked of how to prepare themselves for both receiving their bees and how to grow their hive, as well as what kind of equipment will be necessary to establish a new colony.

The group welcomed both accomplished devotees and newcomers working with their own limited experience. Garrett Thibault, who has helped the program hosted by the Old Stone House, answered questions and gave pointers on how to prepare for receiving bees. Most of those present are expecting packages with a queen and three pounds of bees, the standard setup to start a hive.

During the cold months, a hive will form a "winter cluster." Drones and workers of the colony hurdle around the queen, vibrating as they shiver to keep her warm. Rotating in shifts, they feed off



Garrett Thibault shares his extensive knowledge of bees and their keeping with members of the Brownington Beekeepers Saturday at the Barton library. Photo by Matthew Wilson

honey stored from the year before, sugar syrup to meet the colony's needs.

"It can be intimidating for beginners, you're gonna have bees everywhere," Mr. Thibault said, as he demonstrated how to transfer the new bees into the iconic square stacks many call to mind when they picture modern beekeeping. A queen is first placed in the center frame of the box, then the beekeeper shakes the box down at the open bee hive.

"You're gonna have bees everywhere, but that's normal," he said. "They're looking for the queen." Honeybees are not typically aggressive unless provoked, and if a keeper remains calm and steady, the bees won't attack. A few stings are inevitable along the way, and a novice should likely know to expect them.

Sharing his knowledge as a beekeeper, he gave the attendees a better understanding of where they might want to place their hive. Factors such as wind, heat, and the location of water were just a few of the things he mentioned as important in deciding where might be best for bees.

If the wind is too heavy, the bees could find a location unsuitable. When its too hot, the bees' productivity will decrease as they spend more time fanning the hive. A hive will send out scouts to search the local area, ranging up to three miles from their home. One of the most important things that they seek is water. The closer a reliable, clean water source is, the more bees will be productive in their production of honey. During warmer times, little beads of water might be placed throughout the hive to further cool the structure.

"I can talk bees," said Mr. Thibault. "If we go into a presentation, we could be here for two hours."

It's exactly this type of first-hand experience the group plans to use as it brings together a wide

range of people involved with apiary work to share what wisdom they can. When issues arise, the Brownington Beekeepers can help each other find the root of the problem.

"We get to be detectives for the bees," said Mr. Thibault. "There are better ways to do this, and we can help each other."

The community of beekeepers benefits its members beyond just the shared knowledge, and also acts as a way to hunt out other information.

Bees interact with bees from foreign hives, crossing paths as they search out pollen and any other resources they need. Certain pathogens and pests can appear in a colony of bees. If another beekeeper experiences a particular issue or problem, it could be coming from outside the hive, originating from a poorly maintained or even wild colony. If two nearby hives are going through a similar problem, treating them both simultaneously may save the operations of others in the vicinity.

"We travel on a road, and those aren't always going in a straight path," Mr. Thibault said, remarking on how a radius of three miles can be much larger when traveled as a bee. "Honeybees can cover a surprisingly large area, when you think of how they travel."

Enthusiasts and professionals alike are welcome to join in the gatherings, which are aimed at teaching varied techniques. Regular meetings will start on April 16 at the Old Stone House Museum, where Mr. Thibault will show how to make pollen patties to nourish the bees that have survived the winter. Anyone wishing to join in the activities and demonstrations can reach out to the Old Stone House Museum for details. Individuals can also send an email to nekseeds@gmail.com to request being placed on a regular mailing list for updates about the Brownington Beekeepers' itinerary.

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