



The Lancaster Bee Project

Lancaster Beekeepers advisory leaflet No 19

There are at least 27 different sub-species of the Western honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) but only one, the Black or Dark bee (*Apis mellifera mellifera*) is native to the British Isles.



Between 1916 and 1925 the numbers of the indigenous British Dark bee, *Apis mellifera mellifera*, were decimated in England and Wales by the acarine mite (*Acarapis woodi*), the outbreak being called the 'Isle of Wight disease' being the location where it started. Scotland and Ireland were less severely affected by this outbreak.

To replace this huge loss of the country's major pollinator, large imports of bees occurred from around the world including USA, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

1992 saw the arrival from Southeast Asia, of the parasitic *varroa* mite, which is now endemic throughout mainland Britain. Although most beekeepers have changed the ways in which they keep their bees, in order to minimise the damage caused by *varroa*, around 20% of UK colonies are lost each year to *varroa* related issues.

2007 to 2012 have been disastrous for UK beekeepers. The poor weather prevented the bees from foraging and kept them largely hive-bound, resulting in severe outbreaks of endemic disease and the failures of queen bees to mate successfully. Colony losses across the UK were estimated at around 40% although in some parts of the country losses were nearer 60%.

At the same time, across the country, there was an unprecedented surge of interest in beekeeping and new beekeepers wishing to acquire stocks of bees. Once again large numbers of bees were imported from abroad to meet the demand.

The two sub-species most frequently imported are the Carniolan bee, *Apis mellifera carnica* which is native to a huge area including the southern Alps east into Hungary as far as the River Danube and throughout the Balkans and into Greece and the Italian bee, *Apis mellifera lingustica*, which only occurs naturally in the Italian peninsula and nearby islands. Although in pure form both sub-species are gentle and hard working, originating from a much milder and drier climate, they do not winter well in the North West or thrive in our all too frequent cool summers.

All the sub-species of honey bee, with the exception of the Cape honey bee, *Apis mellifera capensis*, which only occurs naturally in a small area in the Cape region of South Africa, will readily inter-breed. The resultant hybrids are frequently ill tempered,

unpredictable and difficult to handle. This can cause problems for both the beekeeper and, more importantly, neighbours.

Over 90% of the UK honey bee population are now hybrids!

Importation of bees from other areas or abroad significantly increases the risk of bringing disease and pests into the area which, once here, are difficult or impossible to eradicate.

Although new regulations now attempt to control the importation of bees from countries outside the European Union, the UK bee population is still being topped up by major imports of bees, not always from known sources!

The Lancaster Bee project's objective is to develop a strain of bee that is:

- largely of native black bee stock
- docile and of predictable temperament
- well suited to the local environment
- healthy
- reasonably productive and
- has a low tendency to swarm.

Once the strain is established it will be made available to local beekeepers in the form of fairly priced nucleus colonies or mated queens. The first bees of the Lancaster strain were produced in May 2010.

The bees are being developed at the Club's new, purpose built apiary, constructed at a cost of £60000.



www.lancaster-beekeepers.org.uk