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Mother Earth

Insider Trading

By Gayle Morrow

Your hive or mine? Got a bee in your bonnet? Probably not so much this time of year. With a chill in the air and the opportunities for pollen-gathering negligible, honeybees are doing what we tend to do in the winter months—hanging out at home and trying to keep warm.

When the temperature drops, honeybees head for the hive, forming a wintertime “cluster” to keep themselves warm, explained Donna Dzoba, a licensed beekeeper out by Snyder Point, near the Leonard Harrison side of the canyon. The queen is in the middle of things, as you might expect, with the worker bees trading places, taking turns around the interior (warmer) and exterior (colder) parts of the cluster. The bees use their flight muscles to shiver, thereby generating and regulating heat in the hive.

Donna has four hives; each one needs about 150 pounds of honey for the bees to eat in order to survive the winter. They are fastidious little creatures (“Bees don’t pee or poop in their hive,” Donna said) and will periodically venture out of the hive for a “cleansing flight” when the thermometer creeps up. She keeps sugar water available for her bees for those times; obviously a wild hive would not have that perk. Sadly, miscalculation on the bees’ part sometimes results in an inability to make it back to the warmth of the hive. That accounts for the occasional dead honeybee you may see in the winter months. Some beekeepers will wrap hives or put up a windbreak to help bees make it through the winter.

Honeybees have a three-tier labor system. There is one queen per hive, who can live as long as five or six years. She mates with drones/male bees and is then permanently fertile. The fertilized eggs she lays—as many as 2,000 a day—become worker/female bees. Unfertilized eggs become drones. The drones’, shall



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we say, usefulness is limited, as their job is basically to be on call for the queen. In the fall they are kicked out of the hive. There are not many free rides in nature.

Wild or “kept,” honeybees are an amazing and critical component of the natural world. What can humans do to encourage honeybees to come around?

“The more plantings, the better,” Donna said. “Anything that blooms—they love it. Even dandelions.” 🐝



Gayle Morrow, former editor of The Wellsboro Gazette, cooks locally, and organically, at the West End Market Café.