

Stahlman beekeeping notes for 2021

Issue # 23 June issues --- Robbing by other bees

When I work my bees, I really don't check each hive extensively. I rarely look for the queen. I may pull a frame from the brood nest to check for eggs and bee development. But, there are signs that signal to me that something may be wrong with a particular hive of bees.

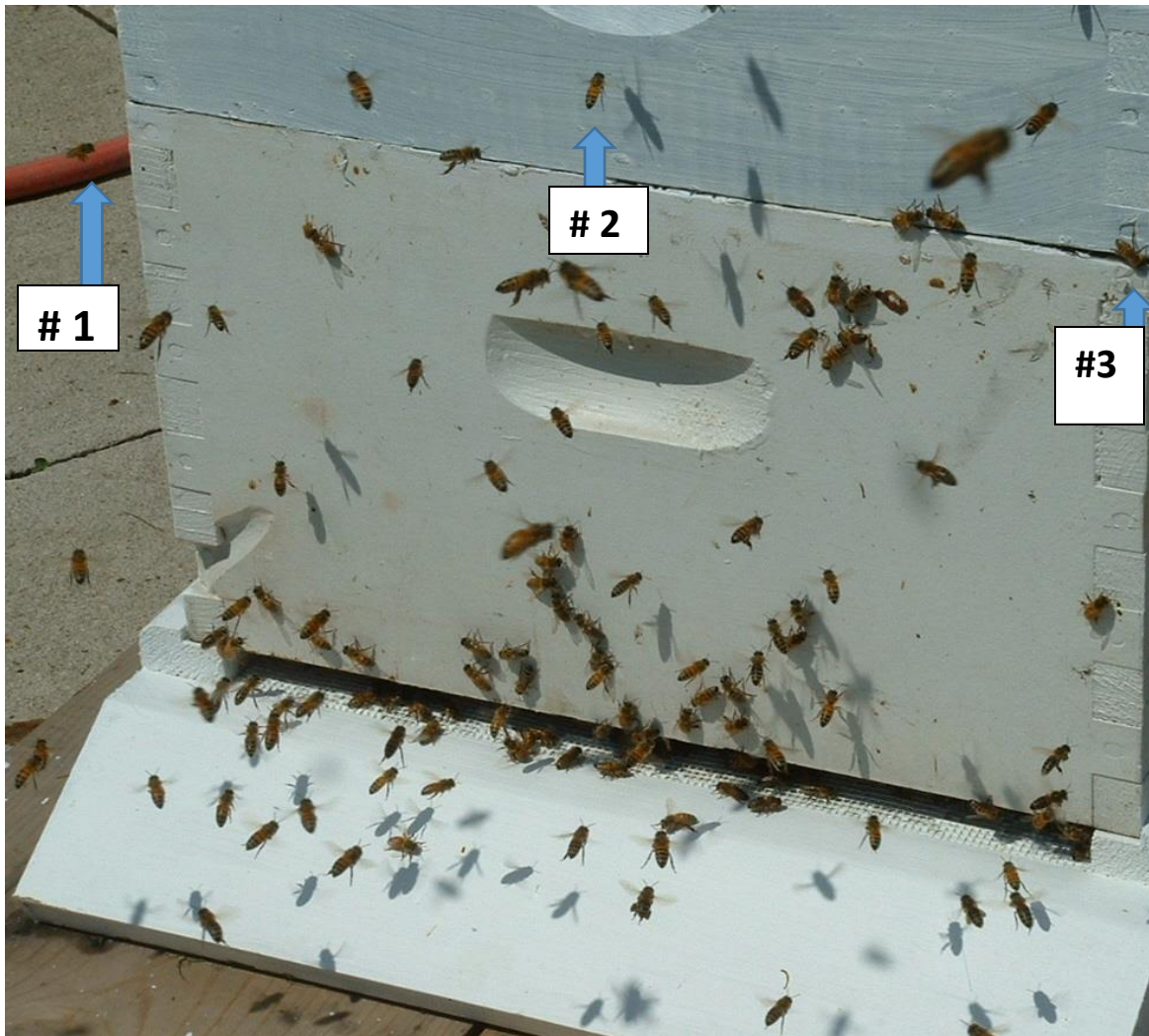
#1-- I check the landing board – Are the bees flying in and out of the hive normally? **This is something new beekeepers need to study and observe.** In hot weather, are the bees on the landing board fanning or clustering on the outside of the hive? Are dead bees under the landing board in a large number? Are there any signs that the bees are being disturbed – things like bare ground at the foot of the entrance, or scratches on the front of the hive? What about dark staining something like someone spitting tobacco juice on the front of the hive? What about any strange object on the landing board – wax chips, dead larvae, little pieces of something looking like chalk?



If I see anything out of the ordinary, my mind sends up a red flag. I ask myself, what is going on with this hive!

What is unusual about this photo?

Normal bee flight is directly into the entrance. A number of bees will be leaving and others entering often with pollen on their legs.



Where are the bees defending this hive?

Check out your hives to see the bees entering the hive. Are they all over the front of the hive as shown here?

A normal hive has bees coming and going into the hive entrance. They are not flying around the hive looking for a way to get in!

Note the location of the bees at #1, #2, and #3.

Below is a hive with normal flight into and out of the hive! Note that the bees are waiting to fly from the hive and those coming into the hive are focused on the entrance. The others are guard bees – older bees not yet ready to forage but they will protect the hive from invaders.



Note the number of bees checking other bees on the landing board! These are guard bees.

The arrows show the direction of flight for three bees. This is normal flight behavior. Bees will be arriving with pollen baskets filled. Foraging bees will be flying away not looking toward the hive.

Robbing bees will continue entering a hive until all nectar/honey is removed. This will last for hours.

There is one other situation in which a number of bees will be flying in front of a hive. This occurs when new foraging bees take their first flight from the hive. They will linger for a short time in front of the hive – no more than 15 minutes. They are fixing the location of the entry to the hive. Once these new bees have the hive's location fixed in memory, they will return to this spot even if the hive is moved.



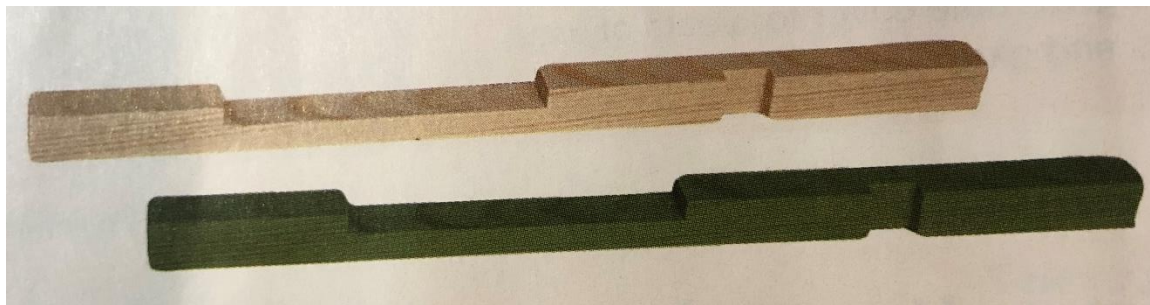
This is another example of robbing. This bucket held honey that was bottled. The bucket had a lot of honey sticking to its side and bottom. It was set outside so the bees could clean up the honey remaining in the bucket. Normally during a honey flow, the bees would ignore a bucket like this.

A bee doesn't have to be hungry to rob from other bee hives. After all the flowers providing nectar have dried up, forager bees are out of

work. They are looking for any source of food for their own hive.

Management to prevent robbing:

Included in most starter hive kits is an entrance reducer. Entrance reducers provide a new hive with protection from robbing bees, mice, and cold weather. Most entrance reducers have two slots cut into them. One notch/slot is about an inch wide and another is six to eight inches wide.



This is one of the easier pieces of beekeeping equipment to make. The distance between the bottom of the box placed on a bottom board (winter side) is $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. This allows the entrance reducer to be placed into the space provided by the bottom board.

During spring and summer, the entrance reducer provides a smaller entrance so a smaller population of honey bees can protect their hive. Normally this is enough to prevent other bees from getting access to the hive. As bee populations grow, the entrance reducer is removed.

However, even a weak hive will have trouble defending a small entrance. If one has a weak hive it might be a good investment to buy a **robbing screen**.

If the beekeeper is not aware of a hive being robbed, the damage done to a hive cannot be undone. One sure sign of a hive robbed is a lot of wax chips and debris on the bottom board.

Action to be taken if robbing is observed!

1. Move the hive to a new location – some suggest two miles. I have observed that a move ½ mile often works. Note: the hive will never be safe from robbing. Moving it just delays other bees from finding it.
2. In an emergency, the hive can be covered with a bed sheet watered down. The water will cause the sheet to cover the hive and lessens the ability of robbing bees from getting into the hive. Again, this is a temporary measure.
3. Install a robbing screen on the hive if robbing conditions exist.



There are various robbing screens sold. Sizes vary to fit bottom boards -- nuc, 8 frame or 10 frame.

Shown here is one of the better styles. It has a screen over the entrance which can be used in several ways.

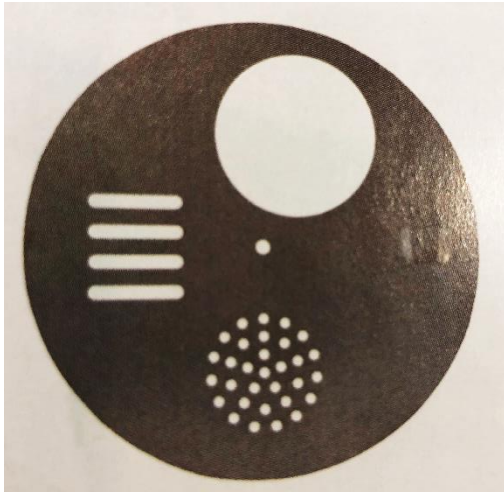
Note the three metal closing gates on the screen. Two at the bottom level allow the beekeeper to reduce the

entrance from two entrances to none. By closing off the bottom entrances, robbing bees will not be able to get in and most likely have trouble getting or finding the top ¾ inch entrance which will allow the bees inside the hive to enter or leave. If under attack the upper entrance can also be closed. A screen of this type can be left on a hive and adjusted as the need requires.

Robbing screens can be placed on weak hives well before robbing becomes an issue!

If one is handy with tools, a screen of this type is easy to build. It might be a good idea to have at least one of these in your tool box of bee equipment just for such an emergency.

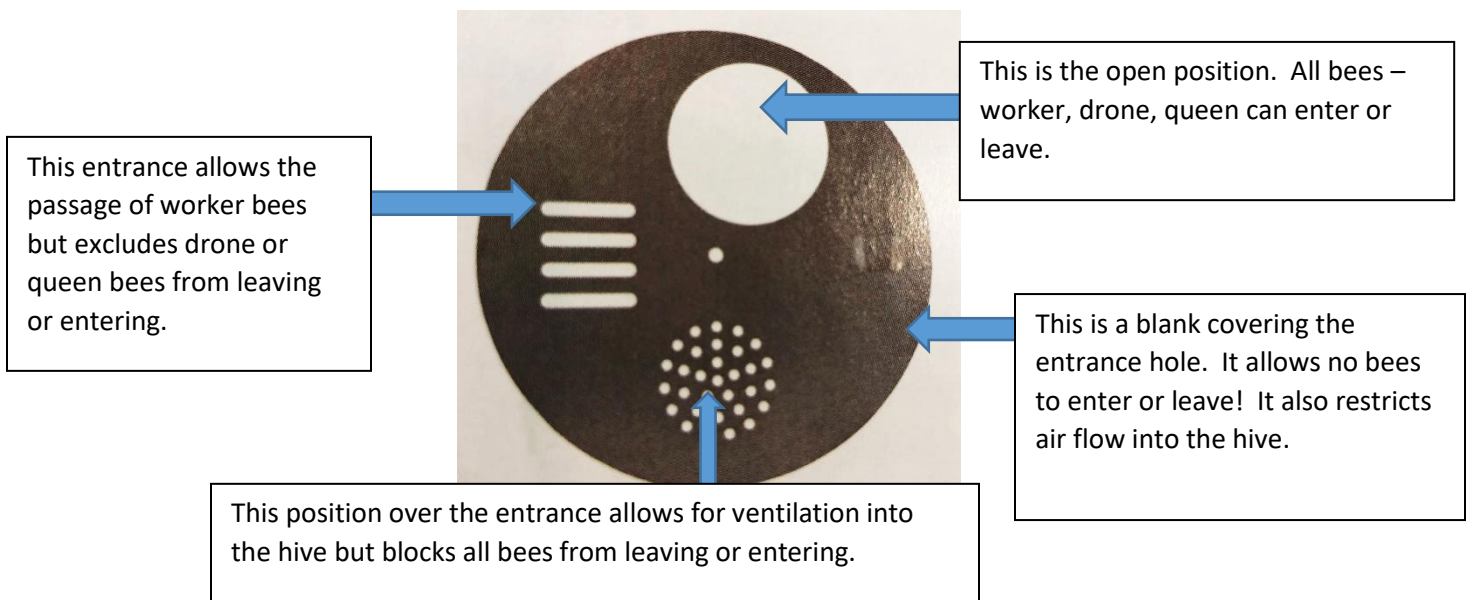
One last type of robbing screen has many uses – especially for those raising queens.



This device is a control entrance for hives having no bottom board entrance. A hole is drilled into a hive box for the bees to use as an entrance.



The control entrance is often called an entrance disc. It has four positions for the beekeeper to use. They are made in various styles and sizes of metal or plastic.



Nucleus hives are at risk of robbing by much stronger hives. This is true especially in the nucleus hives used to raise queens. An entrance control provides beekeepers with management options – close the entrance, open the entrance, use the ventilation entrance position when moving nucleus hives, or use the excluder position to make sure queens can not fly from the nucleus hive – such as abscond or swarm. It could also be used to prevent a virgin queen from flying to mate until the beekeeper decides the time is right.