

SAVING THE BEES

One Hive at a Time

BY JANE PALMER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CORWIN BELL



As the shadows from the late fall sun grew long upon the native grasslands and the musty smell of warm leaves gave way to cooler air, I gazed intently at the teeming mosaic forming and reforming before our eyes. This mass of yellow and black, Claire's bees, were storing supplies for the winter.

"On warm days, I'll come out and just sit down and watch them," said 17-year old Claire Anderson. "It is so relaxing." Anderson, however, won't be collecting any honey. She plans to leave it to the bees for the cold months ahead. Anderson is not a beekeeper. She is a Bee Guardian.

Bee Guardianship is a grassroots movement in the Front Range region of Colorado to save the honeybee species. It was started by beekeepers, Corwin Bell and Karen Sadenwater, who last year trained upwards of 70 Bee Guardians and set them up with their own hives. Bee Guardians act as "gatekeepers" of the bee species, looking first and foremost to the health and strength of their hives, rather than keeping bees simply in order to harvest honey or to pollinate their gardens.

"It is about a caring group of people that are guarding the bees," said Bell, a loquacious, pony tailed Eldorado Springs inhabitant whose fervent energy closely parallels that of his charges.

Right now the bees need all the friends they can get. Since 2006, bees have been dying off in unprecedented numbers, some beekeepers losing up to 90 percent of their hives. The phenomenon has been christened Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). Theories as to the die-offs abound, from pesticide poisoning to mite infestation, viruses to the growth of genetically modified crops, but an undisputed cause remains a mystery.

Bell, however, believes the same ailment that affects humans may also be plaguing the bees. "Stress is the key," said Bell. "It is always stress that causes the immune system to drop." And Bell believes that beekeeping practices themselves may play a part in contributing to that stress, ultimately compromising the bees' immunity.



Bee Guardian, Claire Anderson, watches over her beehive.



Smoking of the bees to collect honey, using chemicals, feeding bees sweeteners - all these practices may be degrading bee health, Bell said. One practice in particular, the use of inseminated queens and the killing of drones that would go out and mate with other hives, could be narrowing the genetic diversity of the species, he said. If this were true, Bell said, the bees as species could become weaker, leaving them more susceptible to disease.

“There is strength in diversity. That is the heart of what bee guardianship is all about,” said Bell.

In case these theories might prove to be true, Bee Guardianship forges a different path. Each newly trained Bee Guardian starts with a feral swarm, which Bell believes by its very existence, has the genetic makeup to survive the mites and viruses that have claimed many domestic hives. The Bee Guardians keep treatment-free hives, do not “smoke” the bees to collect the honey, and do not collect honey in the fall when the bees are laying down their winter supplies.

“We do all the things we can to limit the amount of stress we put on them,” explained Bell. It’s a relatively new approach, but one that has proved popular amongst residents in Boulder and beyond. Bell and Sadenwater’s bee keeping classes have filled up each year with people keen to do their bit to save the honeybee. And the Bee Guardians don’t have the monopoly on looking out for the bees’ interests. Miles McGaughey, from the Boulder Beekeepers Association says that the Boulder Beekeepers have a philosophy for dealing with the bees, along the lines of that of the Hippocratic oath, “First, do no harm.” At a recent meeting at the Northeast Treatment Tree Beekeeping Conference, traditional beekeepers and Bee Guardians shared experiences and ideas with one common goal: maintaining the health of their charges.

And while approaches to beekeeping may differ, both groups agree that beekeeping is far from an altruistic occupation. Beekeepers benefit in ways that extend beyond the pollination of their gardens or the collection of honey.

“It is kind of like having an aquarium,” said McGaughey. “The hive’s activity and the buzz are very relaxing and mesmerizing. I often get tapped on the shoulder and told that dinner was two hours ago.”

Claire Anderson agrees. While she says that she was drawn to becoming a Bee Guardian to “plant a positive seed in the world, create change and help the honeybee survive,” she now admits to loving her bees.

“They are so therapeutic,” Anderson said. “I don’t know anybody that couldn’t like bees once they have been around them.”

Jane Palmer is a science and environmental journalist based in Boulder who works part time for the Co-operative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences.



Claire Anderson with her hive.

