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Rainfall could bring big bee die-off

Experts believe half of state's colonies at risk

By Alexa James



Beekeeper Chris Harp of New Paltz checks honeybee feeding jars at his home. He's worried that record-high rainfalls will mean swarms of bees will die from lack of food.
Times Herald-Record/JEFF GOULDING

NEW PALTZ — Chris Harp is buzzing around his country kitchen, preparing a special summer brew for "the girls."

Chamomile tea, dandelion root, cane sugar, sea salt, water and thyme. "I've been going through 6 gallons a day of my bee tea," he says. "I've never seen them this hungry."

Harp carries his mix outside, refilling a trough made of upside down mason jars with tiny holes punched in their lids.

"I hope I'm wrong," he says, as the fuzzy black-and-gold bugs swarm around him, "but I think we're going to see one of the largest die-offs this winter that we've ever seen, due to starvation."

State data suggests that as much as half of New York's roughly 68,000 colonies are at risk. Record-high rainfalls have grounded bees through much of the spring and summer, diluting nectar and washing away pollen they need to make food for winter.

"I am very concerned about how much surplus honey the bees can put away," said Ronald Papa, state apiary inspector for Orange, Ulster and Sullivan counties. This month, while the goldenrod and purple loosestrife are in bloom, will be critical. "Once that first frost hits, that's pretty much it," he said.



A honeybee feeding station on Chris Harp's property in New Paltz, where more than a million bees on his property are fed. Times Herald-Record/JEFF GOULDING

Experienced beekeepers, like Harp, are turning to organic supplements to help fatten their bees before the season shifts. He tends 24 hives in his backyard and some 200 scattered through New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Roughly 9 million bees in all. He also teaches beginner beekeeper classes and works as a "bee doctor" for farmers.

Still, Harp worries this won't be enough to save New York's honeybees, whose numbers are dwindling at an alarming rate.

"Overall, in the United States, there are 50 percent less bees now than there were five years ago," said Jim Kile, president of the Sullivan County Beekeepers Association.

Colonies are battling deadly mites and new viruses, he said, as well as controversial pesticides and food supplements. Research shows mass agricultural practices, such as trucking bees cross-country to pollinate crops, could be weakening the species and spurring a phenomenon called colony collapse disorder, in which worker bees abruptly vanish.

"We're still trying to figure out why this is occurring," said Paul Cappy, apiculturalist for the state Department of Agriculture and Markets. "Beekeepers are struggling to maintain their numbers."

If good weather holds, local bee colonies could pad their pantries before winter. "Flowers are really producing a lot of nectar right now," Cappy said.

As the sun starts to sink in New Paltz, Harp finishes feeding his backyard bees (they devour the sweet tea in about 10 minutes), then heads to nearby Taliaferro Farms to check on its hives.

Gingerly, he lifts each lid to study its sheets of beeswax.

He smiles, relieved. "This is a gloriously strong hive," he says, pointing to a tightly packed cross-section of hexagonal cells. "This is all baby worker bees about to be born."

First-time beekeepers swarming in New York

The state Department of Agriculture and Markets is registering record-high numbers of new beekeepers, mostly at the hobbist level.

Interested? Here are some resources to get you started:

Cornell University's Dyce Laboratory for Honey Bee Studies:
www.masterbeekeeper.org

American Beekeeping Federation: www.abfnet.org

Chris Harp: HoneybeeLives.org

Beacon Bee: www.beaconbee.blogspot.com