Removing Bees from Buildings

Oregon State University Extension Service
Although the pollination and honey-production activities of the honey bee are economically beneficial to man, the bees themselves are pests when they nest in houses, barns, and outbuildings.
The natural nesting site of the honey bee is a dark cavity such as a hollow tree. Swarms of bees are attracted to and become established in similar areas in buildings, such as the spaces between walls, in attics, and under eaves. The problem then is removing honey bees nesting in buildings.

**Swarms**

Honey bee swarms usually emerge in the spring and summer, the result of overcrowding in the hive. They are only a temporary nuisance, unless the swarm establishes itself in your building. Usually a swarm will cluster in an area for a few hours or days until the scout bees locate a nesting site. Since swarming bees have full-honey stomachs, they are usually gentle. Unless the swarm is causing a problem, or unless you want to collect the swarm, you may leave it undisturbed until it moves on.

Local beekeepers frequently will collect swarms. Names and addresses of beekeepers in your area are available at your county Extension office.

If there is no beekeeper available to remove the swarm and its presence is causing a nuisance, you can destroy it with an insecticide. Wait until dusk and spray the swarm with one of the compounds listed under the heading “Poisoning Bees.” Be sure to dispose of the dead bees, as they may be carrying spores of American Foulbrood.

**Bees in Buildings**

Once a swarm has become established in a building, removal may be a problem. There are no easy or convenient methods. Bees may be removed live, or killed in the building. Removing live bees can be difficult, however, and should be attempted with the help of an experienced beekeeper. Although bees are economically beneficial, it may be more practical to destroy rather than capture the colony.

**Poisoning Bees**

Several materials effectively control honey bees. Aerosol sprays specifically for bee, hornet, and wasp control, as well as spray concentrates and dust containing Sevin, Baygon, or malathion, are available and are effective against bees. Follow the label directions and correct dosage and preparation.
Before applying the insecticide, locate and close all but one entry-exit hole to the colony. The best control is obtained by direct application of the material into the nest itself. Since the entrance may be far from the actual comb, it is advisable, if possible, to locate the nest by tapping on the wall until a buzzing noise is heard. Drill a hole into the nest area, then apply the material directly into the hole. When using a dust it is possible to pour it in through a funnel.

Apply the material only at dusk when all the bees are inside the colony. More than one application may be necessary to completely destroy the nest, especially if the material you are using has a short period of effectiveness. Check the label for recommendations on frequency of application.

A swarm is most easily killed soon after it has entered the building. If it is an established colony, it is best to eradicate it in the late winter or early spring when the colony is weakest.

When using insecticides, observe the safety precautions listed under “Precautions.”

If problems arise and you are unsuccessful, or you do not want to do the job yourself, call an experienced exterminator.

**Removal of Comb and Honey**

After the bees are dead, remove the siding, expose the nest, then remove and burn or bury the dead bees, comb, and honey. *Do not consume comb or honey* since both will be contaminated with the insecticide. If the honey and comb are not removed, they may attract other insects or mice. Honey left unattended by bees will ferment, break through the comb, and run down the walls. Wood soaked in honey is difficult to cover with paint or other wall coverings.

Wash out the area occupied by the nest with soap and water to eliminate the odor of bees which may attract other swarms looking for a nesting site. Fill in the area with insulation material and thoroughly seal off to prevent reoccupation.

**Exposure to Cold**

Bees may be killed by exposure to cold. Remove the siding covering the nest and expose as much of the comb as possible to the cold air. Leave the siding open until the bees are dead, then remove bees, comb, and honey before resealing the area as outlined in “Removal of Comb and Honey.” Since no insecticide is used in this method, the comb and honey are safe for consumption.
Removal of Live Bees

Removing live bees from buildings is a time-consuming process, can be hazardous, and is not always successful. If possible, get help from an experienced beekeeper.

If the bees are located in an accessible area, remove the siding and take the whole nest, bees, comb, and honey. This should be done wearing protective clothing, including gloves, hat, and veil. Use a beekeeper's smoker. Shirt cuffs and pants legs should be tied securely.

A more time-consuming, but safer, method is trapping out the bees by the use of a bee escape. One type of bee escape can be devised by using a wire mesh cone tapering to a hole just large enough for a bee to pass through. Place it over the entrance to the nest. Bees can leave the nest, but have difficulty returning. A trap hive is placed near the opening of the bee escape. This hive consists of a small colony with three to four frames of brood, bees, and a queen in a standard hive body with full complement of drawn comb. The bees from the building, unable to return to the nest, are attracted to the trap colony.
Trapping out a colony will yield the bees in the nest and the honey produced, but not the queen. She will be left in the nest and die from lack of care. This procedure usually takes about a month and should be started in the late spring when the honey flow begins. An experienced beekeeper can advise you on the best location and condition for the trap colony so it will attract and receive the new bees. The following is the standard procedure for trapping out bees:

1. Close all flight holes except one.

2. Build a temporary platform as near as possible to the entrance hole. Make it strong enough to support the trap hive.

3. Either purchase a bee escape at a bee supply house or make one from wire cloth screen. It should be a cone up to 12 inches or more in length. The diameter of the small end should be approximately ⅜ inch and the larger end no smaller than 6 inches in diameter. Fasten the large end over the flight hole so the bees can escape only through the small end of the cone.

4. Place the trap colony on the platform and fasten down (see illustration). One or more supers of comb can be added as needed.

5. Leave the trap on for at least a month. As the bees discover they cannot return to the old nest, they will be attracted to the trap hive. New bees will be emerging from the brood during this time and they can be lured to the trap hive.

6. At the end of the month when most of the bees are in the trap hive, remove the bee escape and the trap hive, then expose the old nest. Wear protective clothing, gloves, hat, and bee veil, and use a beekeeper’s smoker during the operation. The trap hive should be moved at dusk and placed at least three miles from its former position.

7. Remove the comb and honey and thoroughly wash the area occupied by the nest with soap and water to remove the odor. Fill in the area with insulation and seal off to prevent reoccupation.

8. Examine the new colony for American foulbrood as soon as new brood is produced. If you are unfamiliar with the disease, ask help from a professional beekeeper. If foulbrood is present, destroy the colony and burn the hive.
Honey in Old Combs

Honey in old, black combs may taste bitter if eaten in the comb. This bitter taste is due to propolis, or gums and resins, added to the comb and to pollen stored in the comb over the years. The comb should be broken and crushed to allow the honey to drain off. After a day, strain the honey through cheese cloth to remove foreign matter, then bury or burn the old comb. White or yellow comb lacks this bitter taste and can be eaten along with the honey.

Precautions

1. Carry out all insecticide treatments in the evening when the bees are in the nest.

2. Use all insecticides with care, following the label instructions. Do not use inside the house unless specifically recommended on the label. Wash thoroughly after use.

3. Honey bees, combs, and honey contaminated with insecticide should be buried or burned. Do not consume honey or comb.

4. Honey bees often have large colonies. The brood may continue to emerge after the adults are destroyed. If it is impractical to remove the nest, a second treatment may be necessary to completely destroy the colony.

5. When working around live bees, wear protective clothing, gloves, a hat, and veil. Tie pants legs and shirt cuffs securely and use a beekeeper's smoker.