Notes on Managing Russian Honeybees

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The following notes are for pure or reasonably pure stock released by the ARS USDA program. Hybrid Russians can have extreme differences that may or may not be desirable behaviors. Acquire stock from known queen producers who have access to annual releases of USDA breeder queens. Each year breeding stock has improved as they are continually selected for desirable behaviors.

Requeening.

- Difficult with other races & some stock.
- Russian queens introduced to Russian colonies have a 90% acceptance.
- Once released it can take longer for queens to begin laying eggs (10 days).
- Back check time should be 16th day after introduction.
- Supercedure cells are common, but are not a sign of unsuccessful introduction or a failing queen.
- Feeding syrup & pollen substitute improves laying time.

Requeening with cells / similar to using queens.

- Lower acceptance in non-Russian colonies.
- Higher acceptance in Russian colonies.
- Back check 20th day after emergence.

Requeening laying worker colonies.

- It takes 34 days for Russian and 36 days for Italian. Generally 20-40 days after dequeening a colony before laying workers start.
- It is rarely successful to use mated queens.
- It is better to use cells. Cargel / Rinderer found 60% success for either Russian or Italian colonies when using queen cells.
- Virgin queens gradually produce 9ODA which peaks near mating time. They appear to supercede the laying workers.

Spring / over wintered colonies.

- Small clusters, 2-3 frames, will buildup to full size colony.
- Buildup is tied to availability of pollen.
- Nectar alone will not stimulate population development. Feeding pollen or pollen substitute will help stimulate colony growth.
- Speed of buildup is faster than Italians. Beekeeper should provide plenty of room for brood nest expansion by anticipating first pollen flows. Buildup is often underestimated & supering is too late to deter swarming.
- Russians tend to be defensive during the first round of brood rearing. Defensiveness should not be evaluated at this time.

- Large nests during nectar flow, smaller during a nectar dearth. “July fade”.
- After main nectar flow “shotgun” pattern is common. Brood is eaten back during a dearth.
- Queens will stop “shutdown” egg laying during a nectar dearth, and in extended periods of extreme weather.

Nectar flow Management.

- Russians are good to excellent honey producers.
- Supers should be on early and use 2-3 supers with drawn comb.
- Hybrids are in many cases poorer producers.

Fall & Winter.

- Excellent at over wintering. Fall hive organization places food within easy reach.
- Store surplus pollen, covered with honey, in the second hive body.
- Fill upper HB and than sides of lower H.B.
- Russian rarely starve during the winter. They do not lose touch with their food supply. They use less food than other races during the cold months.

Colony Defense.

- Overall quieter and easier to work.
- Hybrid transitions more likely to sting.
- Apiary becomes gentle after 2-3 years of requeening (using pure stock).
- Russians are less inclined toward robbing.

Tracheal mite resistance is excellent without treatments.

- Auto-grooming removes mites as they migrate from bee to bee.
- Mite infestation decreases as bees grow older.
- Russians auto-groom during the critical 24 hours when bees are most susceptible.

Varroa mite resistance.

- Russians are not immune, but are more resistant.
- Mites buildup more slowly. Bees will remove mites slowing reproduction.
- Highly infested colonies recover “bounce back” faster once treated. Russians can survive longer with high infestations – better immunity to viruses spread by mites.

Enhancing mite resistance.

- Create brood less periods by splitting colonies and requeening.
- Fewer mites are found in apiaries when only Russians are used.
- Russian colonies require fewer treatments.
- Resistance is improved using hybrids of SMR & Pure Russian. Low population growth.