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Beekeeping is becoming a more common hobby among Irish people, but few have shown the skill, dedication



Butcher, beekeeper and boatman; one

Holding a well-worn book in bear-paw hands, Sligo native Keith Clarke peers down his nose through a pair of glasses and scans the pages with his finger. He begins reading from Ted Cooper's Guide to Bees & Honey: "A bee performs the round dance indicating forage close by, followed by four workers who will later leave to search for the food. The wag tail dance indi-

cates both the direction and the distance of the food." This explains how the scout bees "dance" in order to communicate to the foragers each day.

After 26 years of keeping native black bees and producing Knocknarea Honey, Clarke is a storehouse of facts like these. He shares

them with boyish wonder. This labour of love that happens to turn a small profit grew out of "the sheer need for a piece of pure honey,"

supply. But I share it out amongst them the best I can," Clarke says.

Winter months are relatively quiet for the bees, whose annual rhythms are tireless, systematic and remarkably hierarchical and refined. Like everything else they do, there is an uncanny method to the bees' efforts at preserving heat. "They keep themselves warm in the winter by forming a cluster. Those on the outside tonight are on the inside tomorrow night," Clarke says. As spring moves in "the bees will sense that the weather's getting mild and they'll get out to start looking for pollen. These days now they're cleaning out things and getting things ready."

Stirring back to life, the bees responsible for sanitation will begin removing the bodies of their brethren that didn't make it through the winter. They will sweep the hive floor, ridding it of broken comb, old pollen and dust, ensuring that their abode is infection-free and ready for a busy season ahead. Other bees begin producing wax and passing it off to still another type of worker bee whose job it is to construct the comb.

Clarke says "Each cell is made at an angle. So when they put the honey into it, it won't flow back out." Most importantly, though, is the queen bee, for whom all of the other bees exist. "They're absolutely useless without a queen. And there's only one in every hive," Clarke says. "She only comes out once and mates. And they reckon she mates 15 feet up in the air, while she's flying. And then she comes back in and never comes

out." The brutish drone is the queen's mating partner. "The drone is the male bee. And he's good for nothing, only doing what he has to do. And eating honey after that. Even in the hive he's of no use. He's in the way. They kill him off at the end of the season."

Starting in the spring, the queen will lay 1,500 to 3,000 eggs a day in comb cells she deems worthy. Nurse bees will then feed the hatched grub, seal them into their cells with wax and keep them warm. About two weeks later, a bee emerges and the brood is blossoming with young workers, reaching a peak of about 80,000 bees per hive. That means that Clarke is keeping as many as two million bees at one time.

By early April, Clarke's apiary will be swelling with new life as the bees zoom around collecting pollen from within a three-mile radius of their hive. "If you stood at the gate there'd be a hum," he says. Clarke allows the bees to forage from flowers that grow in the area naturally--he doesn't plant flowers of his own--and believes his "boys" gather much of their pollen from gardens at the nearby Lissadell House.

The taste and colour of the bees' honey takes on the essences and traits particular to the flowers from



Clarke says. "That was it. It grew on from there. People started asking me for it."

Starting with two hive boxes handed down from a friend, Clarke now keeps about 25 hives and produces between 800 and 1,000 pounds of honey a year, not including the comb. That means over a thousand jars of the bees' amber-coloured nectar sold mostly in Sligo shops but up to Letterkenny and down as far as Dublin, too. "The demand would be greater than the

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and initiative of Sligoman Keith Clarke. Kate Wilson meets Keith and his hive.



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Sligoman's busy, buzzy lifestyle

which they're gathering nectar. Much like wine, chocolate and oysters, each batch of honey has its own 'terroir,' or "set of special characteristics that the geography, geology and climate of a certain place, interacting with plant genetics, express in agricultural products," as defined by Wikipedia. In other words, every jar of honey contains a certain sense of place.

"In the springtime you get the dandelions, you know. And then you get the apple trees. The one that's particularly noticeable in flavour is the whitethorn. It's very nice honey. It's a big bush that grows. If you were here now and you got a right good bloom, it's very beautiful to drive through the countryside and see it," Clarke says. "White clover comes in June. And then your last big honey flow is the bramble."

For millennia, honey has been

used not only as sweetener but as a natural treatment for a variety of ailments. Local, raw honey isn't pasteurised, heated or processed in any way, which means its health benefits remain unaltered. A quick Google search produces page after page listing raw honey's powerful properties, some of which have been scientifically proven, others which are most likely folklore.

Raw honey is said to be full of minerals, vitamins, enzymes, and antioxidants and has anti-bacterial, anti-viral and anti-fungal characteristics. Other claimed uses include helping digestion, strengthening the immune system, eliminating allergies and treating colds and sore throats.

"I use honey for toast in the morning or putting it onto, say, porridge. I'd have it once a day," Clarke says.

Balancing his time working at

W. Clarke & Sons Ltd., the butcher shop his dad opened in Sligo town in 1956, leading tours to Inishmurray on his boat - the MV Fiona Tee - and keeping bees, a busy spring leads to a jam-packed summer for Clarke.

"From April onwards I'd spend every day with the bees. Maybe not for too long but I'd take a wander around to see how things are," he says. "Until the end of July. The flowers are starting to go again at that stage.

"In the summertime I would be covered in bees," he says. "I've had plenty of stings. It doesn't affect me. I'd say it either affects you or it doesn't."

The colours red and blue agitate the bees and often prompt stinging, as do certain perfumes. Predators like wasps and birds also rouse the bees' system of protection.

"Then you have the guard bees. They're all the time watching to make sure nothing goes near them and, if they do, they call in defence and [the predators] get stung," Clarke says. "You'd often see a wasp in the hive while I have it open. And the next thing you'll see is two bees come dragging him out. Like a bouncer. Same thing."

Sligo bees' most significant threat is varroa, a mite that sits on top of the bee and extracts its blood. It is recognised as the largest contributing factor to the modern-day decline of honeybees.

"He can attack them while they're in their cells, before they're born. And when they come out, they're so weak and their wings are not properly developed," Clarke says.

Clarke uses a treatment made my Bayer - the same pharmaceutical company that makes aspirin - that he says kills about 90% of the mites. "The other 10 percent are there and they breed like hell." The treatment can only

be used after the honey has been collected.

Clarke says that getting on really well with the bees is what makes an exceptional keeper. Although he isn't one to wax poetic about his own relationship with them, he acknowledges that they do share a special bond.

When asked if he talks to the bees, he looks down in a sort of sheepish affirmation but quickly cracks a smile

and adds "Sometimes it doesn't be very good talk! They have a mind of their own, the bees."

Clarke continues: "They say when the beekeeper dies that you're supposed to go and tell the bees. That the beekeeper's dead." He just hasn't quite figured out how one does that. "There's things I have to learn about beekeeping all the time. You get to know it as you go along."



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1. PRODUCE: A 454g jar of raw Knocknarea Honey.
2. KEEPER: Keith Clarke lifts a hive box to feel its weight and get an understanding of where the bees are in their late-winter activity.
3. DEAD: A worker bee that didn't make it.
4. BOX: A nucleus box is smaller than ordinary hives and is used for splitting off existing swarms and creating new ones.
5. EXPERT: Clarke knocks on the side of a hive to stir the bees and listen for their hum.
6. COTTAGE INDUSTRY: Rows of jars in Clarke's workshop await being filled, labelled and shipped to shops in Sligo and the surrounding areas.
7. HONEY: Clarke holds a frame, which hangs in the hive and provides a foundation on which the bees build their comb.
8. MINI FACTORY: A row of hive boxes at Keith Clarke's apiary.