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The Time Commitment Associated with Keeping Bees

I was talking to my wife recently and was sharing with her my vision for articles for this column. I told her that I was trying to finish up a series of articles for people who are just getting into beekeeping. Most beekeeping books I have read essentially start beekeepers off with information about how to keep bees. However, I thought that most people getting into beekeeping have some very basic questions that the beginner books do not answer. For example, how much will it cost you to get into bees? How do you know if you are allergic to bees? What laws are associated with keeping bees in your area? I have tried, over the last three years, to address those basic beginner topics. In fact, I thought I had covered nearly everything one would need to know before getting into beekeeping. I was telling my wife what I had written about so far and asked her what she thought I may have overlooked. Without thinking too hard, she said “I would want to know how much time keeping bees is going to take.” Of course, she was right. I get that question a lot from people who are just getting starting. Owing to the quick thinking of my wife, I will discuss how much time it will actually take you to be a beekeeper.

How much time does it take to be a beekeeper? The answer to this question, of course, depends on a number of factors. It depends on what beekeeping goals you have. It depends on what resources are available to you. It depends on the climate in your area. It depends on how much help you have managing your colonies. All that said, the single most important factor affecting how much time you will spend working bees is how many colonies you have to manage. Consequently, I will

discuss the time and labor associated with keeping bees based on the three recognized types of beekeepers: hobbyist, sideline, and commercial beekeepers.

I have decided to arrange this treatise by first discussing what is a hobbyist, sideline, or commercial beekeeper. I will follow that with an abbreviated discussion of common beekeeping activities in each season, i.e. sharing with you what the typical beekeeper needs to do during a typical season: spring, summer, fall, and winter. I, then, outline the approximate time commitment for each size operation for each season (Table 1).

Types of beekeeping operations


To begin this discussion, there is not hard-and-fast rule about what places a beekeeper in one type of category rather than another. Historically, people have tried to do this based on the number of colonies the given beekeeper owns. This, however, can vary significantly based on how the bees are used, where they are kept, etc. Thus, I favor the definitions that focus on the intent of the colonies, i.e. what they are used to do, versus the simple number of colonies managed. That said, the number of colonies maintained by a beekeeper is roughly correlated with that beekeeper’s use of the colonies. Hobby beekeepers do not keep 1,000 colonies; neither do commercial beekeepers keep 10. So, as much as is possible, I try to suggest a range of colonies one might manage in each category of beekeeping. I also use the intent-based definitions that can be found in the glossary of *The ABC & XYZ of Bee Culture*, 41st Edition [these are the verbatim definitions I put in quotation marks immediately following the category name – see the reference list for the full

citation]. I think these definitions make a lot of sense.

Hobbyist beekeepers: “One who keeps bees for pleasure without intent to profit.” Hobbyist beekeepers usually keep 1 – 10 or so colonies, though some people believe themselves to be hobbyists when keeping as many as 50 colonies. Hobbyist beekeepers, sometimes called “niche pollinators,” usually keep bees for fun, to provide pollination services for their gardens and/or fruit trees, or to make and sell a little bit of honey on the side. That said, hobbyists usually only sell their products or bee services to cover the cost of their hobby. They typically are not keeping bees to generate a significant income. In most cases, hobbyists can expect minimal night and weekend work with their bees, unless, of course, moving bees is involved or if those are the times they elect to work their colonies as part of their regular maintenance.

Sideline beekeepers: “One who keeps bees for monetary gain but has other means of income.” Put simply, these are individuals who generate a legitimate second income by way of keeping bees. I would suggest that the typical sideline beekeeper maintains 100 – 300 colonies. However, there are some sideline beekeepers who keep as many as 500 colonies. Obviously, the more colonies one has, the less the occupation can be considered “sideline” and the more that it has to be considered the primary source of one’s income. The key with sideline beekeepers is that beekeeping is not all they do. They typically have other jobs. Thus, sideline beekeepers usually have extremely full schedules trying to maintain two jobs. Much of their beekeep-

Table 1: The approximate number of hours and frequency of visits needed to work all colonies in hobbyist, sideline, and commercial beekeeping operations*. The number of hours in each category for each season reflects the amount of time spent managing the largest number of colonies for hobbyist (10 colonies) and sideline (250 colonies) beekeepers and about 700 colonies for commercial beekeepers. The latter represents the approximate maximum number of colonies a single individual can expect to maintain on a full time basis without additional assistance. The amount of time required per visit per size of operation is not linear. Larger beekeeping operations tend to streamline work, requiring less time per colony visit.

Season	Hobbyist Beekeeper ~1 – 10 colonies	Sideline Beekeeper ~11 – 250 colonies	Commercial Beekeeper ~251+ colonies
Spring	Up to three hours needed to work 10 colonies every 7 – 10 days throughout the season	Up to 50 hours needed to work 250 colonies every 7 – 10 days throughout the season	Up to 120 hours needed to work 700 colonies every 7 – 10 days throughout the season
Summer	Up to three hours needed to work 10 colonies once every two to three weeks throughout the season	Up to 50 hours needed to work 250 colonies once every two to three weeks throughout the season	Up to 120 hours needed to work 700 colonies once every two to three weeks throughout the season
Fall	Up to three hours needed to work 10 colonies once every four to six weeks throughout the season	Up to 50 hours needed to work 250 colonies once every four to six weeks throughout the season	Up to 120 hours needed to work 700 colonies once every four to six weeks throughout the season
Winter	Up to three hours needed to work 10 colonies once every six to eight weeks in a mild climate and three to four months in a colder one throughout the season	Up to 50 hours needed to work 250 colonies once every six to eight weeks in a mild climate and three to four months in a colder one throughout the season	Up to 120 hours needed to work 700 colonies once every six to eight weeks in a mild climate and three to four months in a colder one throughout the season
Notes 	Infrequent night and weekend work: This is necessary only when moving colonies, or making weekends the days that colonies are worked. Infrequent travel may occur if bees are moved for honey production or pollination purposes. Hobbyists often do not move their colonies.	Frequent night and weekend work: Sideline beekeepers usually engage in typical migratory beekeeping practices, requiring bees to be moved at night. Furthermore, they typically have a full time job other than beekeeping making weekend work common. Frequent travel is necessary.	Extremely frequent night and weekend work. Commercial beekeepers spend a lot of time on the road, moving colonies for honey production and crop pollination purposes.

*I tried to overestimate the labor time needed in an effort to show the typical maximum time needed. Of course, this can vary greatly based on any number of factors.

ing work gets pushed to nights and weekends. Sideline beekeepers usually engage in the same types of activities in which commercial beekeepers are engaged. This includes moving bees for honey production and pollination purposes.

Commercial beekeepers: "One whose business is beekeeping, including package and queen production, honey production, pollination, wax or other product production or some combination of these." Commercial beekeepers are beekeepers whose exclusive source, or principal source, of income is generated by keeping bees. As I shared in my October 2016 *American Bee Journal* column (Ellis 2016), there are many ways of generating an income by keeping bees. Commercial beekeepers often have multiple revenue streams (pollination, honey production, selling bees/queens, etc.) in order to maximize profits. Commercial beekeeping can be hard, very consuming work. It is demanding physically, emotionally, and temporally. Commercial beekeepers are often on the road late hours, on weekends, etc. Though there is no static rule, a commercial operation usually is composed of 500+ colonies. In my experience, the maximum number of colonies that a single individual can manage before needing to hire assistance is somewhere in the neighborhood of 700 colonies. I have heard of single individuals managing upwards of 1,200 – 1,500 colonies, but I do not consider this a realistic goal for most individuals. My guess is that the average commercial beekeeper manages over 2,000 colonies and also employs a small team of individuals to make this possible. I would suggest that the time commitment for commercial beekeepers does not vary much over 700 colonies, this because the more colonies one has, the more employees he/she hires to manage those colonies. Commercial beekeepers with 2,000+ colonies "people keep" as much as they "bee keep."

General seasonal management obligations

Spring – Spring, arguably, is the busiest time of year for the beekeeper. Colonies are growing, getting ready for the main honey flow or taken to crops for pollination purposes. During this time, beekeepers are controlling swarming, supering colonies, splitting colonies, applying medications, etc. They may move their colonies to take advantage of honey flows or to provide pollination services for various crops. Colonies may be split in early spring, in advance of the major nectar flow. Colony size peaks in late spring, before starting a slow decline through summer, into fall. Colonies need to be worked every seven to 10 days in spring since spring is production season and a lot can go wrong during this time.

Summer – In summer, beekeepers spend most of their time managing hive pests/diseases, extracting and processing honey, splitting colonies to make increases for

next season, and moving colonies to take advantage of any summer blooming honey plants or pollinate summer blooming crops. If the colonies are in good shape otherwise, they usually only need to be visited every two to three weeks this time of year, mainly because swarm season is over.

Fall – Fall is the time of year that beekeepers ready their hives for the coming winter. Colonies whose disease and pest populations have not been managed adequately can come out of summer with high pest/pathogen loads. Beekeepers in fall spend a lot of their time ensuring that these threats are under control. Fall work also includes feeding colonies to ensure that they have enough food to survive the impending winter. Pending no major problems, beekeepers usually only have to visit their colonies every four to six weeks during fall. Perhaps counterintuitively, beekeepers with more colonies tend to have to make more frequent visits to those colonies during fall. This is because it is easy for things to get out-of-hand if the colonies are not maintained properly.

Winter – Winter is the most stressful time of year for the bees, but the least labor intensive time of year for the beekeeper. In most of the temperate world, the bees are clustering during winter in an attempt to keep their colonies warm. From the outside, it appears that the bees are dormant. If properly cared for in the months leading up to winter, colonies only need to be visited every six to eight weeks during winter in a mild climate, and three to four months during winter in a colder climate. In both location types, the colonies usually are not opened during winter, but are visited simply to ensure that they have enough food to survive winter. Typically, there is little that one otherwise can do to remedy disease/pest/queenlessness or other problems during winter.

Understanding Table 1

I developed Table 1 to provide a very general understanding of the amount of time you may find yourself working your colonies at various times of the year. Please know that the information included in Table 1 is shown as an approximation only. Beekeepers may spend more or less time working more or fewer colonies during the year. I tried to overestimate, a bit, the amount of time one works colonies in an effort to present a "worst-case-scenario" view of the labor involved. Furthermore, I present this information based on a 10 colony hobbyist operation, a 250 colony sideline beekeeper operation, and a 700 colony commercial beekeeper operation. Obviously, the amount of time you spend working colonies will increase or decrease based on the number of colonies you manage.

Perhaps the most important information presented in the table concerns the number of colony visits one would expect to conduct during a typical season. Generally speaking, beekeepers visit their colonies

once every seven to 10 days in spring, every two to three weeks in summer, every four to six weeks in fall, and every six weeks to four months in winter.

Conclusion

The truth about beekeeping is that you can put as much or as little time into the craft as you want. Of course, there is a minimum amount of attention that a colony needs to keep it moving forward, productive, disease/pest free, and alive. Apart from that, the level of management employed is up to the beekeeper managing the colony(ies). I would suggest that some people quit beekeeping not because it is too expensive or difficult, but rather because they did not know the time investment it would take to keep their colony(ies) functioning properly and productive. It is my hope that this article gives you a very general idea about the amount of time involved in keeping bees. I stress that I only included information on the time commitment associated with *keeping* bees. There is, of course, an entire culture built around being a beekeeper. This includes marketing honey, attending bee meetings, participating in honey shows, etc. You really can get about as involved in this part of the beekeeping world as you have time to spend. Some people find themselves more involved in the community of beekeeping than they do in the actual process of beekeeping. To each his own.

My family and I want to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. May God bless you this holiday season.

References

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