**CATCHING AND HIVING A SWARM**

**PREPARATION**
As with most beekeeping activities, preparation is the key to success. In cold financial terms, the loss of a swarm from one of your own colonies probably represents more than half of your potential honey crop from that hive. A swarm that is not yours should be a welcome gift.

There are two stages in dealing with a swarm; the first task is its (safe) capture, followed by installing it in a new home (hiving the swarm). There are almost as many different methods of dealing with swarms as there are beekeepers and all I can do is describe the methods we use.

**EQUIPMENT**
The accompanying photograph shows our standard set of swarm capturing equipment. This is kept on the van and ready-to-go throughout the whole summer. It comprises a swarm box (of which more in a minute), a board (slightly larger than the box), an old sheet, a wooden block, a wastepaper basket, a scoop, soft brushes, a pair of secateurs, string, a water spray and, it goes without saying, a smoker and fuel. You never know what problems you will encounter capturing a swarm and this set of equipment (with the exception of ladders) covers most contingencies.

The cardboard box replaces the traditional straw skep for no better reason really than skeps cost money and cardboard boxes are free. If you have one, a travelling box is alright but may not have the capacity for a large swarm. Any container with frames in is to be avoided as they only make life difficult and bees get crushed.

You will be pleased to learn that a cardboard wine case (for 6 bottles) makes an ideal swarm box; it is robust and, with slight modification, is exactly the right size for purpose. How you obtain your wine case and what you do with the contents (if any) I think I can leave to your initiative. The long dimension of this box fits nicely into a National hive box and it is only the height that needs modification. Wine boxes are 15 inches high and, with a swarm clustered in the top, they become a bit unstable (rather like a double-decker ‘bus with all the passengers on the top deck). For this reason, it is advisable to trim the box down to about 11-12 inches height. The next stage is to melt bees-wax and paint this liberally over the box (inside and out). A hot air gun or hair drier can be used to help the wax soak into the cardboard. You now have a nice waterproof swarm box that is attractive to bees. Holes (4-4.5mm diameter) should be drilled in the sides and bottom of the box to ensure ventilation for the swarm whilst in transit.

The other preparation needed for a swarm is a new home in which to install them; this comprises a floor, a box with frames of foundation, a cover board and roof. It is no good thinking about equipment when you have got a swarm on your hands (not literally) and you will not be popular trying to borrow from other beekeepers.

**CAPTURING THE SWARM**
Capturing a swarm is a bit like fee-style wrestling, only somewhat gentler; you have to use any means possible to remove the swarm from wherever it has settled and into the swarm box. But ‘first things first’, and here is the running-order you should follow:

- First make sure bystanders (if any) are made aware of what is going on and the possible risks if they do not move away
- Put on your bee-suit; most swarms are non-aggressive, but NOT all! Do not take risks just to look macho
- Unless it is late in the day or the weather is cold or wet, your first move should be to gently spray the swarm with clean water. There nothing worse than having a swarm take to the air
whilst you are in to process of trying to capture it and spraying will hold it in place whilst you get your act together

- Now light your smoker just in case you need it
- Lay the open sheet on the ground near the swarm (preferably in some shade) and place the wooden board plus block of wood in the middle
- You are now ready for the crucial operation of transferring the swarm from the place where it has settled into the swarm box. If the swarm is in a tree or shrub this can usually be done by shaking or gentle brushing. Some pruning with the secateurs may be necessary to gain access or to position the box directly under the swarm
- In more difficult situations, such as when the swarm has settled in the middle of a hedge, the only option (without ruining the hedge) is to place the box as close as possible above the swarm. It may necessary to secure the box in place using the string. Gentle smoking may be used to drive the bees up and into the box. This can be quite a slow process and requires patience
- Occasionally a swarm will settle on the ground and then it is just a matter of placing the box over it and letting the bees climb up inside
- When as many bees as possible have been transferred to the box it should be gently inverted on the board with the wooden block under one corner to provide an entrance
- The sheet should be folded over the box on 3 sides leaving the entrance side clear for bees to come and go
- The wastepaper basket and/or the scoop can be used to capture any stray groups of bees which should be shaken in front of the box
- Now sit back and watch. If the queen is in the box then the bees in the air and at the original clustering site will gradually move to the box and bees will start to fan at the entrance. If you have not captured the queen then the bees will start to move in the opposite direction and you will have to start the process all over again. Be patient because it can take up to half an hour to be sure of the outcome
- Ideally the swarm should be left in this position until dusk when all the bees have settled in for the night. The block of wood should be removed and the box securely wrapped in the sheet ready for transport to wherever the swarm is to be hived
- Where the swarm is in a public place or in a field with livestock or simply because the beekeeper has not got the time, the swarm can be removed as soon as the majority of bees have moved into the box. Spraying water on any bees outside the box will cause them to take shelter inside at which point it can be wrapped and removed. A few scouts and stragglers will be left behind but these will disperse in due course

**HIVING THE SWARM (TRADITIONAL METHOD)**

The traditional way is to walk the bees into their new home up an inclined board.

- A board at least 18 inches (460mm) wide is placed leading up from the ground to the entrance to the hive
- The board should be covered in a cloth that hangs down to the ground on either side. This is to prevent the bees wandering off and forming a cluster on the underside of the board
- Make sure the top end of the board fits snugly to the entrance to the hive with no gap. The bees will not respond to the warning `mind the gap` and there is a risk of the queen getting under the floor and the swarm trying to set up home there
- At dusk shake the swarm onto the board somewhere near the top. They will mill around for a bit but it is their instinct to walk uphill and they will soon locate the entrance and start to walk in.
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- Once bees start to fan at the entrance the rest of the swarm will get the message and start to move in the right direction. Often the queen can be seen walking on top of the workers heading for the entrance. Once she is inside it is mission accomplished

**HIVING A SWARM (QUICK METHOD)**

As far as I am aware, this method does not appear in any books. It is not original but I cannot remember where I got it from, but it works and the choreography is as follows:

- Place a floor on the hive stand with an empty box (an eke) on it. Use a shallow box for a small swarm and a deep for a large one
- Shake the swarm into the empty box and quickly (before the bees climb up the sides) place the box of foundation on top, followed by a cover board and roof
- Leave until the next morning and then, using smoke, drive the bees that are hanging from the bottom bars of the frames up and remove the eke

Do not try to do this manipulation the other (more intuitive) way round with the empty box on top, like a funnel into which to empty the bees. It does not work and if you don’t believe me, try it!

**AFTERCARE OF A SWARM**

A swarm is an ideal means of getting new combs drawn quickly and well. It should be hived in a minimum volume hive and kept that way – **no supers added** – until all the frames of foundation have been drawn. Regardless of the weather and any natural nectar flows, a swarm should be given a generous feed of syrup to help them accomplish this task as quickly as possible. A contact feeder containing 4L medium strength syrup (1kg sugar in 1L water) is not too much.

When a swarm occupies a box containing foundation they will start to draw as many frames of foundation as there are bees to cover at the required density. A really large swarm will simultaneously draw all the frames in a deep box in as little as 48 hours. Smaller swarms will only attempt to draw some of the frames and will leave the rest untouched. When they have drawn an initial set of combs they will start to use them for brood and food storage and will not attempt to draw any further foundation until they need to – which is when they have fully utilised what they have already got. This is not what the beekeeper wants! Instead of being used to make wax, the rest of the syrup will be stored in the initial set of combs and could later find its way into the honey supers. To avoid this problem, the frames should be re-arranged, with at least one drawn frame being moved out on each side of the box and frames of foundation moved in towards the centre adjacent to combs on which the queen has started to lay. With smaller swarms, this manipulation may have to be repeated until all the frames will be drawn. When this has been accomplished, the syrup feed should be removed and now, **and only now**, should a queen excluder and supers be added.

You also need to be aware that during first the 3 weeks the number of bees in the hive containing the swarm will steadily decline and will only start to increase again when the first batch of brood starts to emerge. So do not expect wonders of a swarm until it is fully established.

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