

KENT BEEKEEPERS' ASSOCIATION

Orpington Branch Newsletter February 2007

I am sorry to report the death of John Henman, a Bromley member of many years. He played a major part in helping set up the honey show each year but my main contact with him was over the telephone. He was a swarm collector for Bromley and I would ring him if there was a swarm in the northern part of the town. He was usually available to deal with it. He will be missed.

We are proposing to run a coach to Stoneleigh for the Spring Convention on Saturday April 21st. Our plan is for the coach to leave High Elms at about 7.30am and to leave to come home about 5.00pm. This is always a worthwhile trip, with interesting talks and stands by all beekeeping organizations and companies. Sometimes there are discounts available. If you would like to come, please let Tony know definitely before February 24th since we need to know whether it is economically viable. Bromley members have been informed and hopefully will join us for the trip. If you are going, remember that the advanced ticket price for the convention is £11.50 (up to April 8th), whereas at the door it is £16 or £14 for BBKA members with card.

With my last newsletter, I asked whether members would agree to receive it by email in future to save the cost of postage. The underwhelming response was four in favour and one neutral, the latter coming from the treasurer whom I most expected to support the idea. I think I'll wait and raise it at the next committee meeting.

Six of our members came to the talk at Bromley which was very encouraging. The title for the talk was a misnomer since Prof. Lars Chittka described the experiments he and others had carried out to find out the capabilities of bees, of which face recognition was just one. Bees are always learning since they need to learn the colours, patterns and scents of flowers which are most profitable for them. In a large field of grass he had set up a hive and a line of equi-spaced orange tents stretching away from the hive. By providing a source of forage in the line and changing the position of the forage, the number of tents and their spacing, he was able to prove that bees can count.

Proving that bees can recognize faces involves a standard recognition test using photographs in which rewards are given for success and penalties for failure. In the case of bees, the reward is sugar syrup and the penalty is quinine solution which the bees don't like. It takes 1-2 days to train a bee. In selecting the correct face from maybe about twenty, the bees are correct in about 80-90% of cases. A film showed a bee investigating a face and appeared to be concentrating on the ears, nose and mouth. If the picture was presented inverted the bees could not recognize it.

The waggle dance in the hive is an activity that some authorities (but not all) regard as a bee's ability to teach since it is passing on information which is of no direct benefit to itself – it is apparently unique in the insect world. Possibly the practice may have originated in the tropics millions of years ago when sources of forage were far apart. Tests have also shown that information learnt in one generation is passed on to a succeeding generation. And all this with a really minute brain!

Prof. Chittka had started his talk with a slide showing the start of an article in the "Washington Post Journal" stating that insects are not intelligent. He finished with the article's conclusion:

"We see that the issue of insect intelligence is not as simple as we thought. So the next time a mosquito lands on your arm and you are tempted to whack it, we should pause and remind ourselves that the mosquito is a thinking being just like us and that with proper training and encouragement, it may be not only able to count and run mazes, but also to laugh, to sing, to philosophize and even to write poetry.

And then we should whack it, because we hate poetry."

In the discussion afterwards Prof. Chittka said that drones in the hive were important for their part in warming the brood. He also said that vision discrimination in bees was poor because their compound eyes provide a large number of separate images. This is compensated by faster image processing so that they can distinguish the separate flashes of a fluorescent lamp.

Our next meeting is on Wednesday February 21st at Petts Wood Memorial Hall at 8.00pm when Kit will be telling us about showing honey. The day before that at Bromley. Martin Buckle will be showing how he makes models in beeswax.

Frank