Wellington Beekeepers Association

Support and encouragment of beekeeping and beekeepers

February 2026 Newsletter

Next meeting | Wednesday 4th February 2026
Where | Johnsonville Community Centre
Editor| Jane Harding janeh@xtra.co.nz

Beginners Session. Upstairs at 6.45pm. Mark Wendelken will take a session on Honey Extraction. Mark is a very experienced beekeeper and is familiar with a lot of different honey extraction methods.

Main Meeting: 7.30pm We have a visiting speaker this month, Leonard Foster from Vancouver. Leonard is a bee researcher at the University of BC in Vancouver. Leonard's research mostly focuses on host-pathogen interactions, but we have also moved into understanding some behavioural aspects of bees that are controlled by pheromones, as well as testing honey for authenticity and point-of-origin.

Contents

From the President

Happy New Year to everyone and welcome to 2026

The weather has me rather confused, at the end of last year we seemed to get off to a cracking summer but then it all became a bit variable, just as the Pohutukawa started to really get going at the Aotea Lagoon. I can't complain though because Wellington has had a very easy time of it in comparison to other parts of the country.

I've extracted one batch of honey and looking forward to doing another one soon. I was speaking to my niece yesterday who used to keep a couple of hives in Tauranga. She said that she tried to extract before the end of the year because of the real risk of Tutin in her area so that's another reason to be happy to be beekeeping in Wellington. Of course we still need to keep this in mind and test as required.

The Christmas function was well attended, great to see everyone despite the inclement weather. Thank you to all the organisers especially James W for once again preparing the quiz as well as organising a lot of the prizes and the desert of delicious donuts. Thanks also to John B for sorting the food truck and also organising prizes for the quiz. He tells me that Beequip NZ donated some of the prizes which was very generous of them, especially in the current economic climate.

Congratulations to Brenda and Ben Scott for coming first and second in the Mead Competition. I tasted both entries and they both tasted pretty good to me. Thanks also to Richard B for judging the competition.

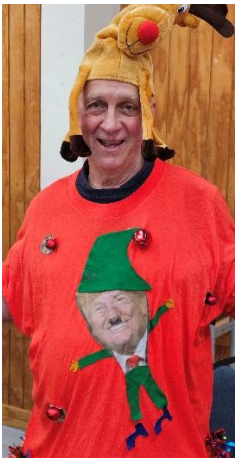
We had an excellent turnout to the Yellow legged hornet trap-making event in mid- January. This demonstrates how seriously club members are taking this hornet incursion which as far as we know is so far confined to the Auckland region. We should not become complacent though and as a club we must be vigilant and informed (see some of the photos below).

I know we should be constantly thinking about varroa treatment and trying to keep the levels low but especially at this time of year after the honey supers have been removed and prior to going into winter we need to make sure that varroa have been treated. More information about treatments available through the club later in this newsletter.

Janine

Christmas Party Photos

Good to see so many people dressing up for the occasion! Here's a selection of the wonderful bee-themed outfits people found for the night:



Mead Competition

And of course we had the mead competition. Congratulations to Brenda and Ben Scott who were first and second. Here is Brenda receiving the cup from Richard Brazcek:

Yellow-Legged Hornets

The response to the Yellow-legged hornets continue to dominate the beekeeping and honey industry as the MPI response to this invasion continues. Fortunately no hornets have been found outside the original location of Glenfield and Birkdale. This update from Phil Lester from 20 January gives a summary of what the current situation is.

And repeating information from last month's newsletter:

MPI Hornet Detection updates and general information

Beekeepers Surveillance Guide

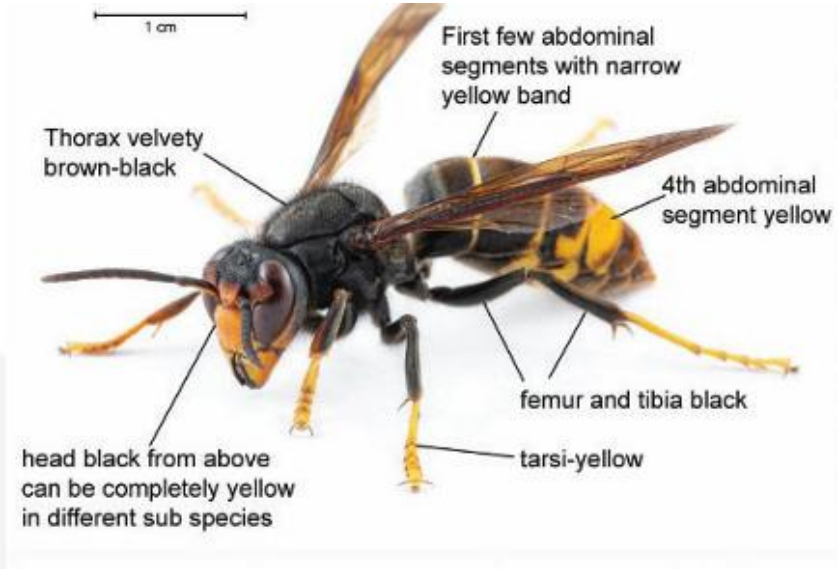
Beekeepers Action Guide to Trapping

Beekeepers yellow legged hornet FAQs

There is a lot of very useful information in these links, including how to make a hornet trap, how to recognise a hornet and what to do if you suspect a hornet or a hornet's nest.

If you see a suspected hornet or nest, photograph and report it immediately to report.mpi.govt.nz or call Biosecurity New Zealand's exotic pest and disease hotline on 0800 80 99 66.

Picture of Yellow-legged Hornet with distinguishing features:



These hornets (1) are larger than the German wasps (2) we usually deal with and also larger than the Asian(3) or Australian (4) paper wasps that you might also be familiar with.

Also look out for hornet's nests:

Yellow legged hornet primary nest (September to January). At this time of year these small (primary) nests, are up to 21cm across but may be as small as a tennis ball. They contain one queen and brood (egg, larva and pupa stages) or one queen and workers plus brood.

Look under/check:

eaves, decks, soffits

garages, sheds

boats, trailers

low to ground, near water

sunny locations.

Hornet Trap Workshop

Several members attended a very useful workshop on making a hornet trap. Some photos follow:

Members get the intro from Frank

Lots of useful discussion...

And sharing of ideas...

And a good time to catch-up with fellow beekeepers

ApiNZ Hornet Update Webinar

And on the subject of hornets, ApiNZ are running a webinar on Wednesday evening to update beekeepers on the situation. If you can't make it to the club night, you might want to dial into this instead.

pī·ā·ora
BEES GIVING LIFE

APICULTURE
NEW ZEALAND

YELLOW-LEGGED HORNET WEBINAR

Invitation from The Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI)

For beekeepers, apiculture industry organisations, and sector stakeholders
Wednesday, 4 February
7:00–8.00pm
Microsoft Teams Town Hall
Joining link: [Vespa velutina Beekeepers Webinar]

Queen Wasp Traps

This trap is designed to catch European Wasp queens only. It is best placed in a garden near fruit trees, by a woodpile or anywhere wasps might like to lay, and about 1-2 m in the air.

The trap is made from a clear 1.25L PET bottle (soft drink bottle, Milk, Orange juice or any similar container) with 3 holes of 13 -20 mm diameter about 10cm – 12 cm (100mm – 120mm) from the base of the bottle. The hole diameter is not millimetre critical but does need to be large enough for the queen wasp to enter and small enough so she cannot easily find her way out.

BAIT: Mix at a ratio of 1 part sugar : 4 part hot water from the tap (not boiling water. 1 litre of water and 250g of sugar make approximately 1.3 litres of mixture.

Dissolve 250g sugar in 1 litre ml hot water from the hot tap.

Stir until dissolved.

Add 1 tsp yeast.

This quantity makes enough for 2 traps.

Allow 1-2 days for the mix to ferment. Place the bait mixture in a warm place for 1-2 days for the solution to ferment (fermenting will stop bees being attracted) If fermenting seems slow add another teaspoon of yeast or keep warm.

Fermentation is important so that bees don't take the bait. The CO2 released by fermentation may also have a role to play in attracting wasps.

TIME OF YEAR Temperatures appear to need to be above 15 C with a few days at 20C or more. Timing is not enormously critical as queen wasps forage for a considerable period after establishing a nest but it is best to have traps out as early as possible. For Wellington this probably equates with October/November if the weather is warm enough.

Thanks to Frank and Peter Lewis from Melbourne for this information.

A Curious Case of a Very Confusing Swarm

Observations from a second-year beekeeper

I've been looking after bees for just over a year now, and this spring I experienced a swarm event that left me both fascinated and thoroughly confused. I wanted to share it with the club, not because I have answers — but because the behaviour raised some really interesting questions.

This wasn't a clean, textbook swarm. It unfolded slowly, hesitantly, and with many mixed signals along the way.

The short version

Saturday: A massive swarm arrived at one of our swarm traps, left on Sunday, returned on Monday, and spent days bearding, clustering, leaving, and re-entering.

A large cluster hung below the hive while bees fanned from the entrance — yet they did not go in.

Despite being massive, the swarm behaved as if it was repeatedly "almost settled"

At one point it looked like there might be two queens

In the end, there was only one — and she turned out to be the original queen from the parent hive

What made it especially puzzling was that none of the usual rules seemed to apply.

A bit of background

The queen at the centre of this story was a strong layer — the kind you'd happily build a season around. She arrived last year at our apiary as part of a collected swarm. We moved her earlier in the year as part of swarm management, then later introduced her into another colony that needed a reset. She took off immediately and the hive expanded rapidly.

A couple of weeks before the swarm, I noticed unusual bearding behaviour, even though conditions didn't seem especially hot or crowded. We added space. Shortly after that, supersedure cells appeared. Since the colony seemed intent on replacing her, we left the cells and prepared for a brood break.

A week later, she swarmed.

Why it didn't feel straightforward (despite being massive)

The swarm itself was enormous — once it finally settled (3 days later), it completely filled two ¾ boxes, and I would have added a third if I'd had spare equipment.

What made it confusing wasn't the size of the swarm, but the behaviour: long periods of bearding and clustering, mixed fanning signals, bees were dancing amongst their calm sister, pointing up to the entrance. There were so many bees that I added another box. Loads of bees walked right out of the hive and started flying around it, almost as if they were wondering why it is now bigger on the inside. The cluster changed shape several times, eventually thinning from the inside and leaving an outer structure like a basket fungus. I noticed loads of orientation flights and only a few leaving to scout. The large cluster, changed from covering the front to hanging down below. The box looked "chosen" but only a few went in. It felt like the swarm was both committed and not committed at the same time.

Sunday at 9:30am they left as one. Settled in a tree 250m lower in the valley (too high to collect). I placed a bait box nearby hoping to attract them that way. Monday at 9am they were back.

The clustering and bearding looked different. The shape was different, they clustered more underneath than across the front. I added the other box again (having removed when they left)





Why I briefly suspected two queens

Again, the cluster shape changed. I saw many go in, but the main cluster remained outside. Eventually I decided to put a box under them and scoop them in, but noticed vigorous fanning into the entrance of the trap box. So I

abandoned my process to collect and left them be. Surely they will go in now?

The next day, the weather was rainy and they were still hanging below the box. I made up my mind to get them in a box regardless and started scooping them in. Handful after handful.

At one point, I physically found the marked queen in the beard below the box and scooped her into the collection box. But bees continued to fan at the entrance of swarm trap box, which made it genuinely look as though a second queen might be present. Under normal circumstances, this kind of sustained fanning away from a box containing a known queen would strongly suggest the presence of another queen, so I left them in the one box, thinking I will sort out multiple queens later.

Two days later, we did a full check and after going through all the frames, I only ever found one queen. What was that about?

What actually happened (as far as I can tell)

The swarm queen turned out to be the original queen from the parent hive — the same one associated with the supersedure cells. She hadn't disappeared quietly; she had left with a swarm that just didn't behave the way I expected a swarm to behave.

In the end, the colony was relocated and is now doing well with an experienced beekeeper in the Botanic Gardens — a far better outcome than leaving such an unsettled swarm to its own devices.

The questions this raised for me

Rather than conclusions, I'm left with questions — and I'd love to hear how more experienced beekeepers interpret this:

- I thought supersedure replaces the queen rather than swarming her — under what circumstances does that assumption fail?
- What factors could cause a swarm of this size?
- If there was only one queen, why was sustained fanning directed at a box she was not in?
- How common is this level of indecision, including leaving and returning?
- Why was the hive bearding well before any obvious congestion, heat stress, or swarm cells?
- How often do we misinterpret mixed fanning signals as evidence of multiple queens?

What I learned (as a beginner)

If nothing else, this experience taught me:

- Bees don't always read the same textbooks we do
- Strong queens can still be superseded — and sometimes don't leave cleanly
- Confusing behaviour doesn't mean you've missed something obvious
- Sometimes observation is more valuable than intervention

Most importantly, it reminded me that not every season is about maximising honey or perfect management — some seasons are about learning how complex colony decision-making really is.

We reached out to Frank for his comments on this situation:

"Most probably a swarm headed by a virgin queen. They don't settle or go into a hive and then abscond. You have to put in a frame of open brood and they will settle."

Frank

Many thanks to Ronel for sharing this very interesting story with us!

Beekeeper wanted in Tonga

VSA (Volunteer Service Abroad) are looking for a beekeeper to work in Tonga to assist the fledgling beekeeping industry. The volunteer beekeeper will assist the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forests to maintain progress in developing the apiculture sector and work with the Tongan Beekeeping Association to help train and educate beekeepers, develop and improve apiary management techniques, promote sustainable beekeeping practices and strengthen the knowledge base of MAFF staff.

If you're interested you can get in touch with David Cramp, who has been in Tonga for 6 years doing this role. davidcramp@rocketmail.com

And if you want more information you can see the details here

Beekeeping here?

New Secretary Required

And another job coming up too…nowhere near as exotic and exciting but a bit closer to home…

Your club secretary has been doing the role for 15 years and is due to retire this year. Our new constitution requires someone to stand down after 15 years in the role. So, if you're interested in a volunteer role that keeps you in touch with everything that is happening in the club and to support the club and committee, there is a job coming up in July.

If you're interested, or your arm is twisted enough, you can get in touch with Jane who will tell you all about it!

janeh@xtra.co.nz 0274212417

Extractor Hire and Tutin Testing

The Club has two manual four-frame extractors for hire. Cost is $20 per hire and hire periods are usually Mon - Thurs or Fri – Sun.

Hire includes a cappings bin and tool, and nylon capping strainer bags which allow you to spin the cappings themselves at the end of your extraction session.

You will need to buy or borrow your own filter strainers and buckets. Full operating instructions are provided.

Extractor bookings should be made to Johnburnet@xtra.co.nz.

Because each extractor stands over 1100mm in height and the legs splay about 700mm (width) to transport an extractor you will need a SUV or hatch back with a wide opening door.

John is currently arranging tutin testing for $20 per sample. Free plastic screw top sample jars are available from John Burnet for this purpose and samples are submitted to the lab in batches of ten for composite testing.

If you are planning to sell or barter your honey, tutin testing is a legal requirement. You are NOT required to test every season if you have regularly tested over past few years with no tutin detected. Club has submitted 80-100 samples annually from members over several years and none have tested positive for tutin.

Varroa Treatments

The Club currently has several varroa treatment options available :

Apivar – (Inorganic) - amitraz-based strips, effective for ten weeks, two strips required per brood box. Use after honey is harvested. Should be alternated with another treatment. $53 for a 12 strip packet.

ApiLife Var – (Organic) - thymol-based wafers, two applications required 3 - 4 weeks apart, needs warm temperatures. Two wafers per packet – one wafer per treatment per hive. $1 per packet .

Formic Pro – (Organic) - formic acid-based pads, one dose (two pads) per packet. Onedose per hive. Good ventilation critical i.e. hive entrance must be wide open. Treatment period is 7 days. $10 per dose.

Oxalerine - (Organic) - oxalic acid and glycerin-infused carboard strips. Effective for ten weeks. 3 - 4 strips required per brood box.

$15 for 20 strip pack, $55 for 80 strip pack.

Treatments can be collected from Membership Sec at monthly meetings or from my home address by arrangement. Payment by invoice or cash on collection. John Burnet (phone 0274-379-062)

Hive Site Available

We've had an enquiry from someone in Tawa who would like to host a beehive in their garden. They are also keen to learn about beekeeping and potentially get their own hives also.

If you can help, please get in touch with Ellie Jackson at elliejackson12@gmail.com

Interesting Articles

And to finish, links to some interesting articles that have come up in the news:

From Eva Durrant: Here's an article from *Nature Briefing* that I found interesting. Little beetles mimicking bees to get into a hive!

https://www.science.org/content/article/bee-hunting-beetles-are-first-animals-known-fake-smell-flowers?utm_source=Live+Audience&utm_campaign=efe4862871-nature-briefing-daily-20260126&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-33f35e09ea-50187616

From John Burnet: Research into the properties of New Zealand bee propylis to help with diabetes. https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/584929/how-bee-glue-might-improve-our-health

And if anyone is going to be Piacenza in Italy on 6-7-8 March, you might want to attend ApiMell – The International Trade Fair of Beekeeping, Apiary Products and Equipment. https://www.apimell.it/

New WBA WhatsApp Group for Advice and Infromation

The Club has decided there is a need for a new Whats App forum for members to ask questions of experienced members, share general beekeeping information and seek advice from other club members. The current Swarm Collectors Whats App is not intended or appropriate for this.

Member Sarah Dye has offered to set up and administer this new forum and we suggest members who would like to be part of this new forum email their name and number to sarah.c.dye@gmail.com.

If you would like to know more about this new Whats App option please contact Sarah or me.

John Burnet
Membership Sec
Ph. 0274-379-062

What's Coming Up?

March – Janine will take the newbies session on robbing, wasp guards, autumn varroa treatment and getting ready for the end of the season. John Burnet and Paul Chapman will be talking about wasps and other pests and how to deal with some of these organically. Phil Lester will give an update on the Yellow Legged Hornet situation

April – Eva will talk wintering down with the newbies and the main meeting will have a bit of a Health and Safety focus, how to make beekeeping easier and safer and some other information about risks and dangers with beekeeping.

Who can I speak to?

President – Janine Davie president@beehive.org.nz
Treasurer – Eva Durrant treasurer@beehive.org.nz

Secretary – Jane Harding 027 421 2417 secretary@beehive.org.nz

Membership – John Burnet – 0274-379-062
Supper co-ordinator - Barbara Parkinson – (04) 2379624
Swarm WhatsApp Administrator - Jim Hepburn (021 926823)
Newsletter Editor - Jane Harding - 027 421 2417