

Napa County Beekeepers' Association Newsletter - May, 2026 issue #27

Our Mission: Supporting Napa's beekeeping community through educational outreach, treatment-free management, and pollinator habitat advocacy.

A few words from Martin



Greetings to you all! Sooooo, this year continues to be a bit of a head scratcher to say the least. The weather has been, for lack of a better word, goofy, and locally the swarm season looks to be over before it even started. Swarm calls in the

valley are still in the single digits and the vast majority of bait hive boxes set out remain unoccupied. Our beekeeping colleagues in Sonoma are in slightly better shape, but only slightly. Something is afoot with the bees this year, but what that *is* remains to be seen. So what does all this mean for hive management for the upcoming months in Napa? Only time will be able to answer that question, but it would be safe to say, "*expect the unexpected.*"

The one word that keeps popping up in my thoughts about all this uncertainty is 'stress.' Just like us, stress can affect the overall health of a colony in multiple ways. Unstable weather or disruptions in the supplies of pollen and nectar can interrupt the natural growth of a hive's population. Once weakened, hives become more susceptible to Varroa mites and the problems they bring, as well any of the multiple viruses that can also be found in a hive. Stress should also limit the number and intensity of manipulations that we beekeepers impose on the bees. This is probably not the year for trying anything too ambitious inside the hive. All this being said, keeping a very close watch on what's happening inside the hives will be more important than ever. Providing a little help will probably be necessary for a lot of the colonies out there. A boost of some 1:1 sugar syrup can help them build up some

stores or continue to feed larvae. It's most likely best to keep hives smaller and not push bees to build up - far better to have a smaller strong colony than a larger weak one.

So what about all the folks that don't have a hive yet and want one? We at the NCBA need to own our part of this conundrum. We pushed for setting out swarm traps to acquire local bees and that just hasn't happened yet, leaving many of you bee-less. Splits might be the only option for acquiring local bees this year, which may not always be practical or possible. Whether you hold onto the split colonies yourself or generously provide another beekeeper with one of them, the colonies will probably need some extra hand holding and feeding to get them established, and certainly monitoring to ensure both end up queenright. Then there is the issue of lack of drones in many of the hives right now. A split colony can rear a new queen, but if other hives aren't sending out adequate drones, she won't be well mated and you could end up losing the split and weakening the host hive. This might just be a year for some of us to

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choose to go “sans” bees. Other options are working a hive with another club member, joining us for club hive dives or taking this opportunity to help out the greater pollinator population and focus on planting forage.

Lastly, thanks to NCBA members for lots of recent help:

★ Diane Dalich and Michael Lauher for helping Rob, Christine and I ‘talk bees’ at the recent Earth Day celebration at the Oxbow.

- ★ Dana Gillespie for helping Christine maneuver some changes to our Wix website, enabling our new online Square membership/donation tool.
- ★ Nader Saghafi for recommending a recent freakonomics podcast that provides excellent insight into the economics of beekeeping, nationally and abroad. Check it out at [Freakonomics Radio: Episode 670. 'Beeconomics 101'](#).

- Martin Podell

Save the Date - NCBA and Other Happenings

MAY NCBA CLUB MEETING

When: Monday, May 18 **NOTE NEW MEETING FORMAT & TIMES**

Come for one or all portions of the evening.

5pm: Club Hive *Moving Day!* The colony will be transferred from the bait hive into its new home!

6 - 6:30pm: Q&A (casual time to ask questions and get some guidance)

6:30 - 8pm: General Club Meeting

Where: Napa Grange, [3275 Hagen Road, Napa](#)

What: Guest beekeeper Major Branzel's life with bees began 32 years ago when an older beekeeper who maintained some hives under Major's apple trees mentioned he was about to retire. *“The bees are yours now,”* he added. *“Have fun!”* From that sink-or-swim beginning, Major rose to become a master beekeeper and long-time president of the Mount Diablo Beekeepers Assoc., his home club. Major speaks frequently at bee organizations and serves as mentor to new beekeepers. He specializes in hands-on, practical beekeeping, including managing two-queen hives and swarm control. Major will share with us a few of the valuable lessons he's learned over the decades and take questions from NCBA members.

MORE UPCOMING NCBA EVENTS

HIVE DIVE - first of 2026!

When: Saturday, May 16 from 10-11:30am

Where: Shawn B's apiary at Black Stallion Estate Winery, 4089 Silverado Trail Napa

Bring: your protective gear and curiosity

Open to NCBA members



JUNE 15 NCBA MEETING... not a meeting, but a SUMMER SOLSTICE POTLUCK

When: Monday, June 15 from 5 o'clock on

Where: Napa Grange

Bring: Food and/or drink to share

Consider bringing: a small jar of your apiary's honey for tasting

Families and friends are welcome.



And two more...

California Honey Festival

The California Honey Festival is a community celebration of bees, beekeeping, and local food, bringing together educators, researchers, and the public to spotlight pollinator health and honey.

When: Saturday, May 16 (10am - 5pm) and Sunday, May 17 (10am - 3pm)

Where: Yolo County Fairgrounds, Woodland, CA

For more info: [California Honey Festival](#)



Climate-Friendly Garden Tour

Offered in partnership between the City of Napa Water Division, Napa RCD, and UC Master Gardeners, this self-guided tour of public and private gardens showcases beautiful, climate-smart, and water-wise features.

When: Sunday, May 17, 10am - 4pm

For more info: [2026 Climate-Friendly Garden Tour - Napa County RCD](#)



Beeco's Bee Talk



To say this year has been exceptionally unique would be an understatement. The weather pattern, lack of swarming, and now excessive absconding is definitely keeping us on our toes. The biggest challenge is fully understanding what's going on so that we can pivot accordingly. Keeping bees has always been a moving target, but this year has everyone guessing. Here's what we're seeing.

Earlier this year there was very little swarming. The numbers were a little disconcerting - in some regions I'd be surprised if they got out of the double digits, when normally there would be hundreds. In my apiaries, I've been seeing the bees start a swarm response by teeing up all the unemployed foragers at the entrance, but many of those hives never took any further action, but just kept clumps of bees at the entrance... not for days, but for weeks. Eventually some of those colonies (not all) ended up absconding. When inspecting what was left behind, I'd be lucky to find any bees; it was mostly all open cell comb, some stores, and often what looked like the remnants of a last ditch effort of a half baked queen cell. To date I have about five of those.

The next symptom that has started presenting itself is some colonies looking like they may have swarmed, with a number of open queen cells from which queens seem to have properly emerged, but all the bees are gone - again just a bunch of open cell comb and stores. I've had about eight of those over the last couple weeks. I'm not saying it's a bee apocalypse, but what the year is showing so far is definitely alarming. The good news is that I still have a number of colonies that are doing fine, not a lot in the way of wax production and definitely running slim on stores, but still holding their own.

If I were to advise people what to look for and what to do, I'd start with making sure your bees are in the shade most the day, or at least after 1pm. What's this got to do with it? Well, my guess is that the current downtick in available forage is going to start wearing down and stressing the bees, and let's be totally frank, the bees in our area are under the thumb of a tremendous amount of environmental stressors. Most of those pressures are out of our control, but moving the bees into shade is one of the things we *can* do to take at least one major stressor off their plate. It's a ton of work for the bees to keep a hive cool that is out in Napa's midday sun, so park 'em under a tree, a canopy tent, or some other form of cover. I'd also be extremely diligent about watching the amount of stores your bees are bringing in and definitely keep a pulse on your mite loads. Like we humans, when bees are stressed, diet can play a big part of how well they 'weather the storm.' Without proper nutrition, the chances of getting ill are

way greater. Then take into consideration the varroa mite that's vectoring about 30 different viruses, and if things continue on the current trajectory, we're going to see a lot more loss to varroa-transmitted viruses than normal. We saw this in 2021 when the situation was very similar to what we're seeing now. So check your monitoring trays, do your mite washes, and heft your hives. My inclination is there won't be very much of a honey harvest this year - any significant stores should probably be left for the bees themselves. As for those with Flow Hives, I doubt you'll be throwing that Flow Hive switch this year. It's actually looking like a 'reverse flow' year where you're gonna be feeding *them*. Mount up, get your C&H sugar game on, and we'll talk more later about the options for 'how, what and when' to feed our bees. Lastly, here's an important bit - bees are a very diverse biological organism, super sensitive to environmental conditions and microclimates. *Not everyone valleywide is going to have the same experiences*. Some colonies may be dripping in honey, others may need supplemental food to survive. I suspect most of us will be less sticky. However it rolls, let's all 'bring our A game' when it comes to caring for our bees so that we are watchful and responsive to whatever the coming months hold for us. Here's to your bee best. Any questions, comments or concerns, reach out - the club has your bee backs.

- Rob Keller

Very few swarms this year. This first one on March 2nd was in Oakville, three weeks later than the first swarm in 2025.



Wax production has already started to slow down due to the lack of forage. This frame was added March 3; by April 8, this was all they had built out!



All indications point to us having to feed this year. We'll talk more about this, but there are plenty of options for what to feed, how and how much.



Understanding the difference between absconding and swarming is huge. Swarming is how bees reproduce. It's a calculated event in the hive where the queen mother takes a big portion of the colony with her and they go looking for a suitable new home. In preparation for the mass exodus, the colony creates a number of new young queens that will take over the hive once their queen mother has left with the swarm. It's a huge event that Tom Seeley has written about extensively. Fascinating stuff - pick up a Seeley book and read about it.

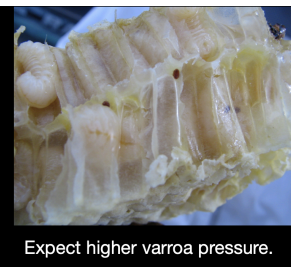
Conversely, when the colony absconds, they throw up their six little legs and leave as if they are just giving up. Bees were bearding for days before absconding.



In some cases, bees were bearding for as long as three weeks, then all of a sudden, they were gone... all gone.



Expect higher varroa pressure. We'll do a big push on training people how to test for mite loads beyond just reading monitoring trays - stay tuned.



Expect higher varroa pressure.

If you see this many mites, you should probably think about employing next level testing.



If you see deformed wing bees in or crawling around in front of your hive, you'll probably want to employ next level mite testing as well.



Pollen Power



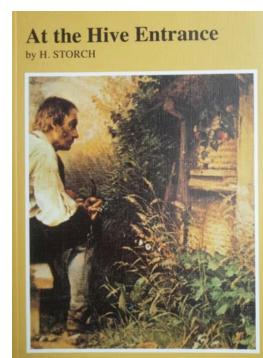
As you observe hives this spring, look closely at the pollen coming in. Beyond it being a great indicator that the Queen is laying and the colony is tending brood, it can be a kaleidoscopic experience to see all the colors being brought home - varying shades of yellow, orange, cream, olive, even bright red! When I first started beekeeping, I remember finding *gray* pollen stored away and having an "oh no!" moment, thinking cells were full of decomposing gunk, only to discover that blackberry pollen is gray in color. All was well - the bees were simply having a hay day with the bramble bushes in bloom!!

Pollen grains' distinct colors are due to pigments such as carotenoids (yellows and oranges) and flavonoids (whites, reds, purples). These hues

convey protection from UV radiation and oxidation for this essential resource. The golden hues, in particular, contrast well against the color of many flower petals, making the blossoms' pollen bounty highly visible to pollinators.

At our club meetings, we have often talked about how much can be gleaned by observing a hive from the *outside*. It is worth mentioning a concise, insightful book by H. Storch entitled *At the Hive Entrance*. The bees have much to teach us - we have merely to quiet ourselves and pay attention.

- Christine Waskowiak



National Geographic - 'Secrets of the Bees'

This astounding documentary was mentioned at our April meeting and is worth plugging again. Released recently, this two-part series takes a deep dive into the world of *Apis mellifera* as well as other bees. The photography alone should bump it to the top of your list, but it also offers insight into the impressive intelligence of these small, but mighty creatures. Check it out - you'll be glad you did!

[Secrets of the Bees - Streaming Online | National Geographic TV](#)



Tales from the Club Hive

April 20: Although rain delayed the site prep for our new club hive at the Grange in April, we proceeded to move the hive off-site in preparation for moving them back to its new location in May. Me (Martin) and Rob retrieving the bait hive in the dark after our April club meeting!



April 24: First bait hive inspection - The swarm has begun building comb on 6 frames. Good sized population, but no stores. Removed 2 empty frames from the outer edge of the box and placed a jar with 1:1 sugar water plus a small pinch of salt inside the hive, elevated off the bottom of the box. Several frames were cross combed. Cut, recentered, and rubber-banded the comb back in place.



April 29: Just a quick look. Small population. Refilled pint jar of 1:1 sugar syrup.



In the Pollinator Garden

Say it. See it. Know it. Xylocopa!

When you see a huge bee in your garden, it will be one of either of the two genera of giant native bees that we have in Napa County. You probably already know them. We have the large black carpenter bees, genus *Xylocopa* and the bumblebees, genus *Bombus*. Two new words to add to your bee vocabulary.

Xylocopa, that is “Zeye-low-kopa” (also appreciated as one of the top ten fun words of the English language) ***Bombus***... which can be easily adulterated into any number of clever, pointed words!

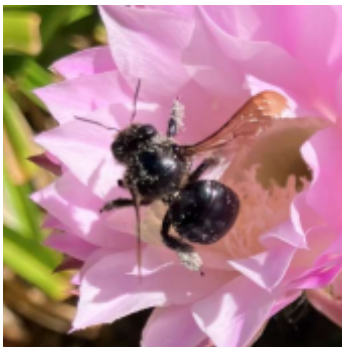
You are already familiar with *Bombus*, generally appearing as a hairy black and yellow striped bumblebee. They have some amazing physiological adaptations as necessitated by their large size, but that is another topic. Our most common *Bombus* is the Yellow-faced Bumble Bee, *Bombus vosnesenskii*, whose appearance gives its name. This bumblebee is a ground nester and its very large queens emerge in the spring, about now. Is there any bee larger than a queen bumble? Maybe the male carpenter bee, which takes us to the other genus of large bees in your garden, those of the genus *Xylocopa*.

We'll focus here on *Xylocopa*, known as carpenter bees. Larger than honey bees (*Apis mellifera*), they are very common, fast moving, and generally appear black, shiny and stout. Carpenter bees are named for their unique habit of using their strong mandibles to excavate tunnels in wood (especially soft raw redwood) to create nests for their larvae, acting much like a human carpenter. In fact, the genus name *Xylocopa* is derived from Greek for “wood-cutter.” After overwintering inside their nesting tunnels, carpenter bees emerge from winter dormancy and are extremely active in the early spring, well before your *Apis mellifera* hive ramps up.

We have two common local species of *Xylocopa*:

- *Xylocopa tabaniformis orpifex*, the Mountain Carpenter Bee, first seen in March
- *Xylocopa varipuncta*, the Valley Carpenter Bee, emerging now

Even with their fancy names, these two species are not difficult to identify while foraging on a flower.



Xylocopa tabaniformis orpifex

- Female (L)
- Male (R)

Size: ¾ inch long with smoky transparent wings

The male has yellow hair on the anterior thorax.

(photos by Chris Cole)



Xylocopa varipuncta

- Female robbing nectar (L)
- Male (R), aka ‘Teddy Bear’ bee

Size: 1 inch long with dark wings

Females are solid black with a violet metallic sheen.

Male are green-eyed blonds, known as the ‘Teddy Bear’ bee due to its fuzzy appearance and inability to sting.

(photos by R. Coville)

Look for the Mountain Carpenter Bees on your native Western Redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) when it blooms in March. They will swarm it, with as many as 30 bees on the plant at the same time. If you don't have Redbud in your garden, then don't miss the October CNPS Native Plant sale, although it can also be grown from seed.

Later in the spring, right about now, start looking for the larger Valley Carpenter bees. They will be on your 'Hot Lips' and other Salvias. The Valley Carpenter bee gets its *Xylocopa veripuncta* name from its habit of puncturing the corolla of a flower in order to reach and rob the nectar. It's interesting that this native bee species appears equally preferential foraging on both native and non-native garden flowers, especially on the Salvias. Is the Valley Carpenter bee an opportunistic generalist? Is this why our European *Apis mellifera* is currently suffering from what Rob refers to as '2026 Syndrome' - that is, the striking absence of swarming and slow buildup of colonies?!

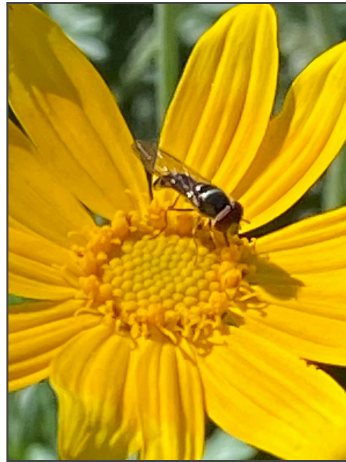
While some may look upon the mighty munching *Xylocopa* with disfavor, it must be appreciated as an energetic and important early pollinator which appears on the scene before our beloved honey bees have built up their spring workforce. It is also enjoyable to begin recognizing the native bees that inhabit our gardens and watch how they interact with your own "kept" bees. The Carpenter bees are easy to spot, and then you can shout... ***Xylocopa!***

Now, the question still remains, does *Apis mellifera* share with these native bees? Start keeping notes on *Xylocopa* as 'sharing' is a hot topic in the native bee world.

- by Chris Cole, contributing NCBA member

Photo Gallery

Photos: Kristin Belair: yellow-faced bumblebee - top left; sweat bee - top right; sphinx moth - bottom middle
Justin Waskowiak: mating pipevine swallowtails - bottom left; *Triteleia lugens* - bottom right
Christine Waskowiak: hoverfly - top middle



NCBA T-Shirt Orders

Beautifully printed locally by Grapeleaf Graphics with our logo, 100% cotton, available in S/M/L/XL. Choose from short-sleeved (regular or ladies cut, \$25) or long-sleeved in grey (\$40). Shirts will shrink a bit, so order a size larger if you like a looser fit. Purchase with cash or check (see t-shirt order form linked below).



Send completed [NCBA T-Shirt Order Form](#) to Martin at martinp.ncba@gmail.com or pick up at an upcoming NCBA meeting.

NCBA Membership - we welcome you!

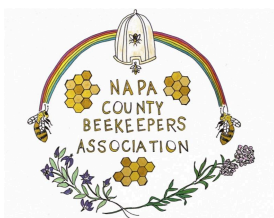
The Napa County Beekeepers' Association has an active membership program. We welcome beekeepers of any level, as well as folks that just enjoy learning about bees and the greater world of pollinators. Your membership dollars enable us to offer the benefits below, In addition to covering various administrative and website expenses:

- Guest speakers on a range of topics
- Hands-on educational events & workshops
- Various swag discounts & freebies
- Individualized mentoring/consultation
- Monthly meetings and seasonal gatherings
- Monthly newsletter



You may also submit a membership form online at our website: <https://www.beekeepersofnapavalley.org/form>

Note: a digital payment/donation option via Square is now in place on our website.



Napa County Beekeepers' Association

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