

Napa County Beekeepers' Association

Newsletter - March, 2026 issue #25

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! It's hard to believe, but spring is already right around the corner, with the change of season being marked by the Vernal equinox on March 20. This celestial waypoint marks the midpoint for the annual expansion phase of a honey bee colony's life cycle, with

populations peaking with the summer solstice. Inside the hives, bees are building new comb in which to raise all of these new bees, as well as preparing for sending out spring swarms. Locally, this year's swarm season has been a little slow to get going - only time will tell how strong of a swarm season it will be. The weather and duration of the nectar flow are key factors in determining the intensity and length of the year's swarms. Many of you have built and set out bait hives to hopefully catch a swarm. It will be interesting to see the results of our group's bait hives in the coming weeks and months.

As we learned from Christine Kurtz's fascinating presentation at our February meeting, there are ways to tell if and when a hive is preparing to swarm in advance during our early season inspections. By actively monitoring the growth inside the colony and providing bees the space necessary to expand, the beekeeper can, at times, prevent or minimize the chances of a colony sending out a swarm. Early spring weather is always a bit unpredictable, but with the warmer days and nights, we are now able to perform more detailed and thorough hive inspections. By adding empty frames for the bees to build fresh wax on, the colony can expand the size of the nest. Now is also a great time to remove any old frames of dark and grungy comb. There are a lot of chemicals and pathogens that can build up in old wax, so by removing it from the hive, we can improve the

cleanliness and living conditions for the bees. It is also a good time to consider expanding the size of the hive entrance. With the increasing population of bees out foraging, providing more space to enter and exit the hive ensures they can do their work efficiently. Lastly, and best of all, IF you see the colony bringing in plenty of nectar and pollen, now is a good time to collect a little of last year's honey for ourselves, too!

There is always more to learn as a beekeeper. Lately, one of the conversations we've been having is how beekeeping is not only a year-round commitment, but how it also comes with some incredibly important and time-sensitive tasks, with spring inspections being one of them. At times, even being just a few days late for an inspection can mean the difference between a hive that receives the timely care it needs and one that will be moving on. We always need to remember that a colony is making its own plans to ensure its well-being and survival, with or without our interventions. As beekeepers, we are merely providing the colony a habitat in the form of a hive box and frames to raise their brood and collect stores in. If we don't do our part and follow the cues they give us about their needs, they will be more than happy to find themselves a new home.

- Martin Podell

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Save the Date - NCBA and Other Happenings

MARCH NCBA CLUB MEETING

When: Monday, March 16, from 6 - 7:30pm

Note we are back to our usual third Mondays.

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

What: *Guest speaker and Apiarist Emily Bondor, presenting "Sustainable Beekeeping in a Changing World"*

Cost: Free for NCBA members; sliding scale \$5-20 for non-members



Emily Bondor is an apiarist and educator. She started queen rearing with the Maui Queen Bee Company in 2013 and from 2014-2020 worked with the Napa Valley Bee Company. Emily started the Santa Cruz Bee Company in 2015, and through her business, mentors new beekeepers, provides hive management services, and teaches beekeeping courses through the local community college and UC Santa Cruz. Emily is president and serves on the board of the Santa Cruz Beekeepers Guild. In 2020 Emily joined the Adaptive Bee Breeders Alliance to help lead the national effort to raise stronger and more adaptive queen bees nationwide. *We cannot wait to host Emily - she will have much to offer for newer and more experienced beekeepers alike.*

To learn more: www.santacruzbeecompany.com.

Napa County Farm Bureau Ag Day

Celebrating local agriculture, Ag Day is always a fun and lively event. NCBA will have a table (and possibly a demo hive) to share the wonder of bees with visitors, including field trips of children who *love* this event. Let's have NCBA members on hand! You do not have to be an expert, just enthusiastic and willing to spend an hour or so 'talking bees' to visitors.



When: Thursday, March 26 from 9am - 1pm

Where: Napa Valley Expo

For more info: [Ag Day — Napa County Farm Bureau](#)

To help out at the NCBA booth: email Martin or Christine at napaco.beekeepersassoc@gmail.com

CNPS Spring Plant Sale & Wildflower Show

This much anticipated annual sale, run by our local CA Native Plant Society, is *the* time to purchase CA native plants for your gardens and landscapes that do such a spectacular job of attracting bees and other pollinators, are climate-wise *and* beautiful!

When: Saturday April 11, 10am - 3pm

Sunday April 12, 10am - 2pm

(CNPS member pre-sale, Sat 9 - 10am)

Where: Skyline Park, 2201 Imola Ave., Napa (free admission to Skyline Park during sale)



Napa Valley CNPS Wildflower Hikes 2026

The Napa Valley chapter of the California Native Plant Society offers guided wildflower walks each year. If you have not yet visited one of these many destinations and witnessed the bursts of wildflower spring colors, lace up your hiking shoes and check it out:

[Napa CNPS Wildflower Hikes Schedule \(March - May\)](#)



Master Gardeners' Tomato Plant Sale and Education Event

Mark your calendars and stay tuned for more info on the tomato varieties that will be available during this popular spring event, as well as how-to's on growing tomatoes.

When: Saturday, April 11, 9am - until sold out

Where: 1710 Soscol Ave. Napa (next to Central Valley Hardware)

For more info: <https://ucanr.edu/site/uc-master-gardeners-napa-county>



Earth Day Napa 2026

Earth Day brings together organizations from all over the Valley to mark the 56th anniversary of Earth Day. NCBA will be present at the event, letting Napans know about our organization and its mission. We would love to have *you* join us to represent NCBA.

When: Saturday, April 18, 11am - 4pm

Where: Oxbow Commons

For more info: [Earth Day Napa 2026](#)

To help out at the NCBA booth: email Martin or Christine at napaco.beekeepersassoc@gmail.com



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](#)



Napa Grange Musical Events

Now that NCBA is meeting at the Napa Grange, many of us are learning of the *fabulous* musical events also hosted by the Grange. An intimate, one-of-a-kind setting with excellent acoustics... and coming up soon:

❖ **Natalie Cressman & Ian Faquini at Napa Grange**

Sunday, March 8, 7-10pm

For tickets: [Natalie Cressman & Ian Faquini at Napa Grange](#)



Beeco's Bee Talk



Let's take a minute and dive deep into follower boards. If you're not from the Bay Area, I doubt you've even heard about them, they're very regional.

Follower boards are those two solid boards, the size of a frame, that take up the #1 and 10 positions in a 10-frame box (or #1 and 8 for an 8-frame box). I'm not really sure where follower boards originated - maybe a twist on what they used to call dummy boards in the UK. Back then they were used more for insulation than anything else, filling the entire space of two frames.

They were brought back into management practices around here by Serge Labesque,

probably in the mid-2000s. I remember him first explaining them and thinking "Whaaaaaat...?!" The more I worked with them, though, I knew I'd never go back. Not only that, but I became increasingly annoyed when I had to deal with a full 10 frames in a box. I thought to myself, "*I'll bet it's true what Randy Oliver says... the more conventional beekeepers kill 200 bees with every inspection...*" A box with 10 full frames is way too cramped, good luck getting the first one out. Frames #1 or 10 are extra painful being right up against the sides, usually cemented in with propolis or



wax. The cool thing is that you can use followers in both deep and medium boxes, and with either 8 or 10 frame hives. While I don't use mediums much, there are many beekeepers that do and also use followers. The ideal hive for me is two deeps with 8 frames plus two followers in each. This leaves about a half inch gap between the outside of each follower and the inside of the box.

Follower boards also help with air convection. Hive moisture builds up this time of year as the bees dehydrate nectar into honey. Most of that moisture condenses on the roof of the hive and runs down the sides. The followers help to keep that moisture away from the comb. However, the best thing for me is how followers make easing into a hive so much less invasive. You just gently lift out or slide the follower over and there ya' go. "How come you rarely get stung?" people always ask. That's one of my secrets - using follower boards is a very gentle way of letting the bees know I'm coming, and often I don't even need smoke.

Another great plus for using follower boards is how they allow us to expand and contract the size of our hives. Using followers, you're not locked into always having 10 frames in a box (photo right - see arrows). You can have fewer frames for the bees to build on (appropriate for a small colony), and followers placed on each side of those frames insulates the bees while preventing them from filling in that extra hive space with lots of cross-comb. When the bees need more space, you can easily insert more frames and keep nudging the followers towards the side of the box (photo right, 3rd down). As always, with whatever number of frames you have sandwiched by followers, all should be pushed back together when finishing up an inspection, leaving just the $\frac{3}{8}$ " beespace between them all to avoid cross-combing.

The followers also help with expansion in another way. You can pull a few frames out of your full box and move them up into a new box with followers - this is vertical expansion. It's a great way to keep the brood intact, but also increases their hive space. The key is to always make sure you have more frames in the lower box and fewer in the top - think pyramid here. If reversed, the bees will build comb off the bottom edges of frames and followers in the upper box, filling the empty space in the lower box with burr comb which can turn into a management nightmare.

Keeping in mind the eventual need for expansion, I also try to get into all my hives in the late fall and pull one frame in each box, taking them from 8 to 7 frames. That way, in the spring with the first sign of wax flakes, I can open up the hive and quickly add a frame when it's generally still cold. It gives the bees some room to grow and buys me a little time. This year, the weather got warm, then dropped back to freezing. The bees had built up in the warm weather and were getting cramped, but it was too cold to add on a box and move up into a vertical configuration. So I just pulled the followers and added a frame in the space they were occupying. Of course, when the weather warms up, I will have to rush back to expand those hives vertically, but at least I'm putting a dent in the bees initiating a swarm response from being over crowded. This time of year the follower boards are also a great indicator of swarming. Just before a swarm initiates, a bunch of bees (the ones that don't have any duties in the hive) will hang out in the open space provided by the follower, waiting for the mass exodus (photo bottom right).

Follower boards are easy to make. For the longest time I just used whatever plywood I had around. I'd cut it to size, slather some gorilla glue on one edge, screw on the top bar, and that worked great! But as with everything else, I've learned a couple of things. I don't like exposing bees to the glue in plywood. I go to great lengths to keep all the plastic out of my hives, so it makes sense to be concerned about the glue off-gassing as well. Now I try to use only solid wood, mostly pine. One big tip is to use *hardwood*



for the top bar; I can't tell ya' how many of the ears I've broken off over the years when using something more lightweight.

People can get really hung up on the follower board's size. One misunderstanding is that followers are used to *exclude* the bees from part of the hive, so people cut their followers to be tight. In fact, you want the bees to have full access to the hive space beyond the followers in order to chase out beetles and other pests. It is alright if there is a little space (up to ~0.5") between a follower and the inner side of the box. About five years ago, Mann Lake started selling follower boards. They are pretty good, but generally too wide. I've found they tend to get glued with propolis up against the hive wall, so I just shave off a bit of the width. By increasing the gap between the edge of the follower and the hive box, it eliminates the too-tight space which happens to be perfect hive beetle habitat.

For all the reasons above, I strongly believe follower boards are the way to go. There are so many advantages to using them and well worth the effort in including them in your hive management.

- Rob Keller

Membership & Various Admin Notes

The following notes are a follow-up to topics touched upon at our February club meeting:

- **Hive Buddies:** Attendees were invited to provide their contact info if they wished to be on a 'Hive Buddy' list. This list will be distributed *only* to those who have signed up, and enables those beekeepers to contact others on the list to ask questions, visit each others' hives, and connect for mutual support. If you missed the meeting and would like to be included, please email Christine at napaco.beekeepersassoc@gmail.com and *provide your name, city (hive location), phone and email.*
- **NCBA is transitioning to a March-to-March membership plan.** What does this mean for you?
 - If you joined NCBA before March 2025, club renewal is the full donation amount for whatever level you choose to renew at.
 - If you joined from March to October 2025, membership renewal is 50% for whatever level you choose to renew at, good through February 2027.
 - If you joined November 2025 to present, your current membership is effective through February 2027.

Each member will receive an email as a gentle reminder of where your membership is at. You are under no obligation to renew, but we hope that you do so and continue to be involved with NCBA. If you are not yet a member, we encourage you to join!

- **NCBA Involvement:** At our upcoming March 16 meeting, we will present a number of opportunities for members to become more involved in running the club... from being part of leadership, to holding a particular responsibility (e.g., hive box building or education), to swarm patrol. We look forward to talking to you about ways to become more involved based on your individual interests and/or skills. Please consider what you might like to bring to our group.
- **Natural and Regenerative Beekeeping Facebook group:** It is heartening to learn about other beekeeping groups that embrace bee-centric, treatment-free approaches similar to ours. A particular Facebook group was recently brought to our attention and for those of you who 'do' Facebook, it really is a great resource. For example, just posted was a talk entitled "*Transitioning from miticide treatments to Varroa resistant honey bees*" based on studies being done in the UK. If interested, you can check it out at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/naturalandregenerativebeekeeping>

Tales from the Club Hive

February 3: February was an interesting month.... Rob placed a bait hive nearby and did a quick peek in the hive. The monitoring board was covered in standing water and a TON of drowned mites - yikes! He tilted the back of the hive up about an inch and moved an unused J-frame down from the upper box into the brood nest.

February 5: Martin did a quick follow up. The new frame already had drawn wax and most of the moisture was gone. Capped drone and worker brood with larvae and signs of hygienic uncapping. Upper box was empty except for some of last year's capped honey.



February 19: Cold and very windy, but a lot of activity at the hive entrance. The monitoring board showed heavy pollen, fresh wax flakes, worker and some drone brood uncappings. Wax moth larvae found as well.



February 26: Very warm and heavy activity at the entrance. First inspection of the year. No sign of significant moisture inside the hive. Lots of bees in the upper box, empty comb had been filled with nectar. Found one broken frame, tried to rubber band the comb into a new frame, but it wasn't stable. Placed that comb in the feeder box instead and moved the lavender to the down slope side of the box so any condensation would drip onto it. Bottom box was full of nectar, larvae, capped drone and worker brood, and lots of bees. Moved one frame to the upper box and added a new J-frame to the brood nest. Widened the hive entrance.



In the Pollinator Garden

Visit a flowering plant on any reasonably warm, dry day and you will likely spot our beloved honey bees, sipping nectar and packing pollen into little bundles on their hind legs. The European honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) gets lots of love, and well it should - it's responsible for pollinating 75-80% of food crops in our country (about 30-35% globally). Although now considered naturalized, the honey bee is *not* native to our region, having been introduced to North America by European settlers in the early 1600s. However, it keeps company with many true native bees - over 4000 species in North America, with around 1500 of those found in California!



Of our native bees, most are not commonly known to us. Many have secretive habits and most are solitary, very unlike the highly social honey bee. And many are tiny, such as the 2mm long fairy bee, seen here next to the largest of our species, the carpenter bee, sitting on a quarter.



Bumble bees are our only native bees that are truly social. Like the European honey bee, they live in colonies (albeit much smaller) with a single Queen, female workers, and male drones. Bumble bees establish their nests in pre-existing cavities, such as deserted rodent burrows, under grassy clumps, even old bird houses. *Unlike* the honey bees, a bumble bee colony dies off each autumn, leaving only a newly born queen to overwinter and carry on the 'family line.' Having mated, the young queen will hibernate for the winter in a cozy place such as a hole in a rotten log, beneath a stone, perhaps even digging a protected burrow in the soil. Come spring, she will emerge (hungry!) and look for a spot to start up her own nest.

Photo left above: Queen honey bee surrounded by female workers (Christine Waskowiak)

Photo left below: Bumble bee nest in old cushion fibers (Christine Kurtz)



While both the European honey bee and native bumble bees have varying levels of social structure, the remaining native bees are largely solitary creatures. We can divide these solitary native bees into two general groups: miners (or ground nesters) and masons (or cavity nesters). Making up 70% of native bees, the miners prefer a sunny spot with



fine soil into which they can dig their burrows, each of which receives a bit of 'bee bread' (mixture of pollen and nectar) upon which an egg is laid. The developing larvae will eat the bee bread, pupate, and eventually crawl out as an adult bee. Since these burrows are just below the soil surface, one can only imagine how destructive untimely tilling or digging would be. Deep layers of mulch will also hinder their emergence; a thin layer of compost or leaves enhances our gardens *and* enables these bees to emerge. *(photo right: Xerces/Sarina Jepsen)*

The other 30% of native bees are masons, or cavity nesters. Masons use ready-made holes or spaces such as hollow stems, beetle holes, even empty snail shells! As do the miners, the female bee deposits a ball of bee bread and lays an egg on it, but then uses bits of leaves or mud to seal off that egg's brood chamber before moving on to another.

(photo right: Xerces/Katharina Ullman)



Each of these native bee species, regardless of its size or visibility, plays a key role in the pollination of flowering plants which in turn supports biodiversity, food security, and overall ecosystem health. Understanding their life habits means we can help by:

- 1) leaving plenty of bare soil, or using lighter and more permeable soil covers (thin layer of compost or fallen leaves) for ground nesters

- 2) leaving snags and woody/pithy stems for cavity nesters
- 3) minimizing or eliminating tilling of the soil
- 4) and of course, avoid harmful chemicals in our gardens and landscapes

Lastly, but importantly, 20-45% of native bee species in North America are pollen specialists, meaning they rely on pollen from one or very few plant species for their survival. In contrast, honey bees are generalists, able to utilize pollen and nectar from a wide variety of flowering plant species. For specialist native bees, if their host plant is not to be found, the bees will perish. Also, *when* these native bees emerge is largely tied to the blooming time of their preferred plants. The take-home message for us gardeners - plant a wide variety of native plants, be less tidy, sit and watch, and you are certain to meet some of our less known pollinator friends.



Blueberry mason bee, *Osmia ribifloris*

- Christine Waskowiak

Book recommendation: *California Bees & Blooms: A Guide for Gardeners and Naturalists*
by Gordon Frankie, Robbin W. Thorp, and Rollin E. Coville

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 *newly available* long-sleeved in grey (\$30). 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.

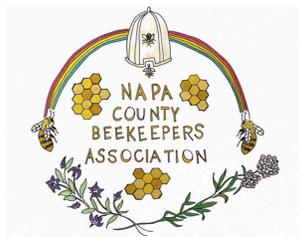
NCBA Membership - sign up now!

The Napa County Beekeepers' Association has an active membership program. In addition to covering various administrative and website expenses, membership dollars enable us to offer you:

- Guest speakers on a range of topics
- Hands-on educational events & workshops
- Priority access to available bees (via swarms, splits)
- Various swag discounts & freebies
- Individualized mentoring/consultation
- Continued monthly meetings & newsletter



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



Napa County Beekeepers' Association

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