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It's swarm season; don't destroy our pollinators

Phyllis Stiles, OPINION 10:42 a.m. EDT April 24, 2015



On a recent Friday, an unfortunate tragedy occurred at a store on Patton Avenue in Asheville. Someone spotted a swarm of honeybees, and before a beekeeper could come to their rescue, the store manager called an exterminator rather than risk a customer getting stung.

This should not have happened. Here's why.

While honeybees are responsible for every third bite of food we eat and contribute \$15 billion to American agriculture each year, their numbers are declining precipitously. They are battling a combination of diseases, parasites, pesticides, and malnutrition.

April and May are prime swarm season and it's a special privilege to witness swarming honeybees.

After World War II, there were about 4.5 million commercial hives in the United States, compared to only a paltry 2 million today. Asheville elected to become the first Bee City USA in 2012 to raise awareness of how vital the pollinators are to life as we know it, and the challenges they face.

Because honeybees must live as colonies, they are actually a superorganism. In other words, a single honeybee cannot survive alone. They have a complex society in which members perform services ranging from gathering food, to health care, heating and cooling, nursing babies, etc.

Splitting the colony in half and leaving with the old queen allows a new colony to be born, with a new queen.

To prepare for swarming, nurse bees create new queen cells and the old queen's court withholds food for a few days to make her flight weight, since the only other time she has flown is for mating.

Then the worker bees that are leaving the hive fill their honey stomachs for the journey to their new home. Gorged on honey, their abdomens are distended and they are physically incapable of stinging. You could almost hold a swarm in your hands with no fear of being stung.

Unprotected by their hive, a bee swarm is dangerously exposed to rain, cold and myriad predators and generally cannot survive more than three days. Ironically, with no hive to defend, they are much less defensive when swarming. Their focus is protecting their queen at the center of the swarm.

Throughout the day, scout bees busily fly to about a three-mile range to identify prospective homes. They report back to the swarm through waggle dancing in a figure eight. The more intensely they dance, the better the chances

their prospect is dry, protected from predators and large enough to house the colony's food and babies. It's really fun to watch multiple waggle dancers on the surface of a swarm!

In a democratic process — kind of a town hall meeting, they choose their new home, usually in a hollow tree. If a bee has found a better prospect, a scout will investigate and report back with her own waggle dance. When the scouts reach consensus, the swarm takes flight to build their comb in their new home — wax comb produced from their wax glands to store either pollen, nectar, or brood.

Unfortunately, honeybee colony survival rates are even lower when unmanaged. Managed hives have been surviving at a rate of about 50 percent to 70 percent per year, but “feral” colonies at a much lower rate.

So if you see a swarm, let a beekeeper or Cooperative Extension know immediately before it changes locations so a beekeeper can attempt to rescue the bees. In Buncombe the swarm number is 828-255-5522.

Most communities maintain a lengthy swarm call list. Almost all beekeepers dream of catching swarms, since buying bees costs about \$145 per nucleus hive. Someone has started a national directory of willing swarm catchers at www.honeybeeswarmremoval.com.

Most importantly, you will be helping to sustain one of the world's most fascinating and beneficial creatures.

Phyllis Stiles is founder and director of Bee City USA, making the world safer for pollinators, one city at a time. For more information, visit beecityusa.org.