

# What You Don't Know About Beekeeping

This is a bit of a rant.

We beekeepers are entitled to a rant at all the non-beekeepers out there, and I type faster than most, so I'll nominate myself to try to represent us all.

Colony Collapse Disorder has been all over the news, but no one has explained what the problem really is or what beekeeping really is. There's been lots of drive-by journalism, and lots of hype, but very little information of value in the "mainstream press".

So, you wanna know about beekeeping?  
These days, its really all about almonds.

They make us do insane things.  
No, that's not right, the money makes us do insane things.  
But the almonds are where the money is.

Almonds have done to beekeeping what cocaine did to Miami.

Bees aren't really supposed to be pollinating in February in the western hemisphere, but that's when almonds bloom. Almonds had a natural range running from India to Persia. Different weather over there. And no one ever planted so many almond trees anywhere ever before. The USDA says that the California bearing almond acreage has gone steadily up every year:

1994	433,000	2001	530,000
1995	418,000	2002	545,000
1996	428,000	2003	550,000
1997	442,000	2004	570,000
1998	460,000	2005	580,000
1999	485,000	2006	585,000
2000	510,000	2007	615,000

So while the number of hives keeps going down as more and more beekeepers give up the craft, the almond growers need more and more hives every year to pollinate ever-expanding acreage. So the pollination fees go up. But then there's "grading". If your hives are weaker in the sole opinion of the grower, you don't get full price, and you might not even break even on the deal.

Because all this insanity is expensive. Everyone views beekeeping as such a bucolic undertaking, but they're wrong. Beekeeping is the process of converting diesel fuel into honey and money. Its more about trucks, forklifts, cellphone reception, and GPS coordinates than it is about bees. And it is all about knowing obscure things, like where the sleepy lonely 24-hour gas stations are that sell diesel and how to refuel faster than a

NASCAR pit crew, ‘cause there just isn’t a truck stop or gas station anywhere that welcomes a truckload of bees, and if you don’t keep moving, the bees overheat and die.

Beekeeping has become so much about machines and speed, that the American Beekeeping Federation has “forklift rodeos” where testosterone, alcohol, and fuel are mixed to produce entertainment and bragging rights. There was a women’s competition too, but my bet is that the females refuse to put up with being segregated next year, and kick male butt all over the lot. Check out the videos:

<http://www.beeculture.com/content/forkliftRodeo.cfm>

And why the drums in the video? That’s how many of us store what we feed the bees. In 55-gallon drums. You have to feed your bees when there’s nothing blooming if you want to have a strong colony in time for the almonds, you see.

And there’s constant pain. Your back aches from bending over hives all day after a “night” of 3 hours fitful sleep curled up in the passenger seat in the cab of a 1984 Kenworth that’s going to need a transmission overhaul soon. Those boxes we keep bees in weigh from 40 to 100 lbs each, and you have to lift off the top ones to look in the bottom ones, so we lift weights all day long. And despite what we might bluster, every bee sting hurts. A dozen bee stings hurt more. Sure, we could wear bee suits, but then we’d die of heat stroke before noon, so we rather get stung and only put on the suits if the hive seems “ornery”. You’ve never lived until you’ve been stung 50 times in a minute, but if you do get stung 50 times in a minute, you don’t want to live. We go through SPF-55 sunblock by the gallon. We can’t drink enough water to stay hydrated. We sweat so much, our sneakers get soaked.

And it’s about coffee. Coffee so strong a spoon can stand vertically by itself in the cup. Beekeepers are caffeine-based lifeforms. Our circadian rhythms are permanently screwed up. We are up long before dawn, and working hives until after dark, and then we are up all night driving the bees to get them to another crop. Often on subsequent days. No wonder someone turns over a truck loaded with bees on the highway just about every year. The hours are brutal.

But some of the minutes are absolutely breathtaking. Sunrises that Disney would pay millions to be able to film. Absolute silence, except for the sound of the bees. Trees in bloom as far as you can see. The smell of a hive. You really do have to go find a beekeeper and ask him to put a veil on you and let you just pop the top off a hive and inhale. It’s like nothing you’ve ever smelled. Heaven smells just like that, I’m sure.

But keeping the bees alive long enough to make a buck has gotten more and more difficult every year. All this stuff comes across the oceans to the western hemisphere, and all of it kills bees. Tracheal mites, varroa mites, brood diseases, two kinds of Nosema, eighteen different viruses, it goes on and on. *“Predators, pests, and diseases, oh my”*. Every single hive is absolutely certain to “get” something or other, and all of those somethings are not supposed to be here in the first place. Blame the WTO.

Our dads and granddads had exactly one problem - “foulbrood”. We have many new problems, all appearing since the mid-1980s. So many, the textbook describing them all now runs 575 pages long, and gets depressingly thicker with each new edition.

So this CCD thingy is only the *latest* in a series of disasters that have struck beekeeping. This one has merely been more difficult to diagnose. And of course some sort of exotic invasive pathogen or pest of bees has at least something to do with it. This one is starting to look like the effects of multiple exotic invasive pathogens or pests of bees combined with this, and that, and the other thing.

The idiots that blamed cellphones didn’t realize that bees tend to be kept and deployed for pollination so far out in the sticks that we can’t even get a cellphone signal most days. (Used to be that we could use those Iridium satellite phones, but they were expensive, and then the company went kaput. So the phone’s a nice paperweight.)

But beekeeping is something people *choose* to do. There’s better money in nearly any job you could take, including flipping burgers. Why do we engage in such a crazy pursuit?

Like I said, the hours are brutal, but some of the minutes are breathtaking. Beekeeping is a spiritual experience. Sadly, the religion is Calvinism. (Look it up.)

And we’d rather be pushing up daisies than pushing paper around on a desk.

But do you support your friendly neighborhood local beekeeper? Did you even realize that, no matter where you live, you are highly likely to have a “local beekeeper” near you? Quick, got any honey in your kitchen at all? Sure you do – it’s the remaining half of the one-pound jar you bought over a year ago, and you think it has “gone bad” because it has merely crystallized. (Don’t throw it out - just put it on the stove over the lowest possible heat in a pan of water with the top off, or, better yet, in the oven with only the oven light on. It will melt back to a liquid.)

But where did that honey come from? Sometimes the label does not say, sometimes the label does, and most often it says something like “Honey from Argentina, Canada, China, and the US”. Yeah, right. Maybe 1% US honey blended in just so they can make the claim that there is US honey in there. And howcome you have even 3 different kinds of olive oil, but have never even tasted or compared Tupelo honey with Orange Blossom honey, or Sourwood honey, or any of the eleventy-seven other different types of honey? Did you even realize that each honey from a different plant bloom tastes different? And you think you are a “gourmet”? You have no idea what you have been missing.

So, the next time you are eating something (anything at all, really, ‘cause even alfalfa and clover for beef cattle needs seeds, and seed stocks need pollination) but more likely one of almonds, apples, apricots, artichoke, asparagus, avocados, beans,

beets, blackberries, blueberries, broccoli, brussel sprouts, carrots, cashews, cauliflower, celery, cherries, chives, citrus, coconuts, coriander, cranberries, cucumbers, currants, dates, eggplant, endive, figs, gherkins, gooseberries, grapefruit, green peppers, guava, kiwi fruit, leeks, lettuce, macadamia nuts, mangoes, muskmelon, nectarines, okra, olives, onions, oranges, papaya, parsnips, passion fruit, peaches, peanuts, pears, persimmons, plums, pomegranates, prunes, pumpkin, quinces, radishes, raspberries, rutabaga, soybean-based Soylent-Green extruded food-like products, squash, strawberries, turnips, watermelon, every spice in the spice rack, and 30 more things I can't remember right now, recall that for each and every one, a beekeeper moved his hives into a field in dead of night and mud of spring, convinced his bees to pollinate that crop, and then moved his hives out in dead of night before the grower started spraying poisons to kill the pest insects, so you'd have that perfect fruit or veggie. "Food porn", we call it. If you weren't so damn picky about mere appearance, growers wouldn't have to spray so much poison on your food, and bees could stay right next to the fields most of the time. Instead, your demand for "fantasy fruit" and "virgin veggies" has created an underclass of gypsies. That would be us.

And now we find ourselves in the unenviable position of having our bees and our livelihoods become the canary in the dark, dank global coal mine created by negligence in world trade, biosecurity, and environmental regulation. People who never met any of us continue to internalize their profits, while externalizing their costs on us.

Only state troopers and tired toolbooth operators even know we exist.  
You never see us, because we roll past your bedroom on the interstate only by night.  
We'd wave, but you're sleeping, aren't you?

Wake up.