

Relocating A Swarm

Story is my youngest bee vacuum customer was 15 year old Annaliese, from Oregon, who received a young entrepreneur grant to start her bee business at 15 (now 16). She purchased a vacuum and extra catch box. I went to a family reunion not too far away from where she lived which is a small one traffic light kind of town. I decided to surprise her with another catch box as my youngest customer. Had the chance to visit with Annaliese and her parents about her bee keeping. Her parents and Annaliese had no experience in keeping bees before buying the vacuum and a few hive boxes. She ended up catching 17 swarms that first season and when I asked her of the 17 how many did she lose? She said, "none...." I have caught swarms and set them up only to have them fly away after putting them in the hive box. That's when she said, "Dad and I don't empty the catch box like you do, but from underneath the hive body box." I had been selling the vacuum for five years at that point and none of my old time beekeeper customers had ever mentioned releasing them from underneath nor had it occurred to me. Too much traditional thinking I guess.

I don't have any trouble with getting removal/cut out bees to move down because they always have the comb/brood to move back down into. As long as the catch box is dark the bees will move down. With a "swarm" and the hive body box below the catch box the bees will often start building comb right on the screen of the catch box rather than going down. Using Annaliese method of releasing the swarm from below the bees move up into the hive body above immediately after taking the slide out. I tried it last season and it worked for me every time so I'm a believer and passing it along. I have been meaning to get a video out but just hasn't happened yet.

Traditional release from above: Works well with bees from cutouts/removals where you have the bee's own comb to attract them down into the brood.

- 1 Prep the hive box for receiving a swarm or cut out.
- 2 I put the entrance reducer on the smallest opening or next larger size with big hives. I stopped leaving the box wide open, even with big hives, because of robbing attacks and yellow jacket attacks. I have removed huge feral hives with one small opening so hopefully I am learning from mother nature and how big of an entrance the bees really prefer.
- 3 Set up the hive body with a frame feeder/or frame of CAPPED honey, empty frames, and reducer boards to reduce the size of the box initially and then as the hive grows I pull out the reducer boards. I will put in drawn out comb, frames with brood, but have stopped putting in rubber banded cut honey comb from cutouts/removals in the hive because of the robbing attacks the open honey caused. Contained/capped honeycomb is ok to rubber band and install. One of the reasons I now put the frame feeder in the hive body to get them going again quickly.
- 4 Put the catch box on top of the prepared hive box and put the cover board and top on the catch box. Top cover is a must because if the catch box is not completely dark the bees will not move down into the prepared hive body box below.
- 5 Pull the slide and allow the bees to migrate back down into their brood and comb. Not 100% but most of the time they will move down no problem. I usually set up and release in the afternoon and when I come back the next morning I can remove the empty catch box without disturbing the bees with no problem.
- 6 If the bees stay in the catch box for a day or two then they are not going to move down because they will start building comb on the screen. If that is the issue then I will put a 4" box on top and slap/knock the bees down into the 4" box. I then have a thin sheet of plywood/insulation that I will lay on top of the bees. This will force the bees to go down into the hive body below and as they distribute themselves through the hive body the plywood/insulation/ or card board will go down until the bees are all in the hive body. Put the cover board and top on the 4" box and let them be overnight. I return in the morning and

remove the empty 4" box along with the piece of plywood/insulation/ or cardboard, replace the cover board/top on the hive body box and they are ready to go.

Release from below is especially important for swarms that don't have familiar comb/brood to attract them down into the hive body box. (Method contributed by Annaliese)

- 1 Put the catch box full of the swarm upside down on the bottom board with the reducer removed temporarily leaving it wide open for ventilation through the screen now on the bottom.
- 2 When you are ready to put the prepared hive body box on top of the catch box give the catch box a quick slap/knock on the bottom board to make sure bees are not clinging to the metal slide. Unlike the traditional release, where the bees are clinging to the screen, the bees may start clinging to the metal slide. If left long enough the bees will cling to the metal slide and will get squished when you pull the metal slide out. So slap the bees down to the screen, quickly set the prepared hive body box on top with cover board and top in place, and pull the slide. This will minimize losing any bees being squished when you pull the slide out. Important note: If your prepared hive body has a top entrance/exit at the cover board level make sure you plug up the entrance/exit during your preparation. You don't want the swarm escaping as quickly as you release the bees.
- 3 The swarm will migrate up almost immediately into the prepared hive body above. Bee's natural instinct is to move up and they will.
- 4 You can then remove the empty catch box but to improve your odds of keeping the swarm and that they don't move on I recommend keeping them captive for two or three days. I am convinced that it is important to give the swarm at least three days for them to change the smell of the hive from a foreign smell to the swarms smell. I have emptied a swarm into a prepared hive body only to have them march out the bottom entrance and fly away.
- 5 To increase your odds of keeping the swarm leave them captive in the hive body/catch box combination. The frame feeder or a frame of capped honey will provide them with plenty of nutrition to start building comb in earnest and establish a new home/hive.
- 6 After 2-3 days you can gently set the hive box full of bees to the side, remove the catch box, and replace the hive body box on top of the bottom board with the reducer back in place. If you want to give them a few more days to become acclimatized to the hive body box, without disturbing the bees, simply slide the black blast gate door open and let them have 1-2 days more becoming accustomed to the box. After that extended period you can then remove the catch box from beneath the hive body box and hopefully the swarm stays put.

It's ironic that they call us "bee keepers," because if the bees don't want to stay, they won't. We keep bees that only want to be kept. Some just want their freedom.

Note: If you are limited in time and need the catch box for another swarm or removal/cutout you can remove the catch box as soon as the swarm moves up. Gently move the hive body box to the side, remove the catch box, and replace the hive body box on the bottom board. Then install a queen excluder at the entrance or having put a queen excluder beneath the hive box on top of the bottom board to keep the queen from moving out.

Epilogue: Annaliese's little business became successful enough that two local tourist restaurant businesses approached her/parents and offered to buy her all the bee equipment that she needed to grow her business if she would sell them her honey to be used at their stores. Her Mother said that she had to put her foot down because Annaliese was plenty busy at school without trying to run a full time honey producing apiary. Her parent's, who have full time jobs, help her with her little business and they stay plenty busy as it is without additional expansion.

Ironically the valley area that Annaliese lives in was once known for its significant honey production and the honey was considered the best in the state of Oregon. As far as they knew Annaliese was the only one in the area with any number of beehives.