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Book Review

by Nigel Hurst

THE BUZZ ABOUT HONEYBEES (Biology of a Superorganism) Author Jürgen Tautz

I recently received this book, with a request to review for the magazine.

There are many bee books covering a wide range of related subjects, produced over many years. Sometimes it is difficult for a reader with an interest in bees to know where to start.

Just as a meeting with somebody new can create an impression within seconds of that meeting; my first handling of this book was just such an experience. A heavy well bound book with an interesting picture on the cover. The feel of the book is good, the paper quality is good. On opening my first impressions are confirmed, stunning pictures taken by Helga R. Heilmann, just draw the reader into the book, leaving you wanting to take them all in as quickly as possible.

Resisting the temptation to just drool over the pictures, I start at the beginning.

Professor Tautz, is a professor at the University of Würzburg, where he and his team study the biology of honeybees and are committed to the communication of that knowledge to a broad audience.

This book has recently been translated into English, by David C. Sandeman, after already being translated into ten other languages.

There is a Scottish connection as David obtained his doctorate from St Andrews University, where he also lectured in Zoology.

The proposition in the prologue is that the bee colony is really a Mammal in many bodies.

What follows is a very interesting description of the colony strategy, aims, and methods of survival in a random environment.

"Man's Smallest Domestic Animal-a Picture Guide":

The picture guide will I am sure appeal

to all readers of this book, leading one from beautiful colour picture to picture, using no more words than necessary to describe the purpose and organisation of a bee colony.

The book progresses through the development of the colony, what bees know about flowers, bee sex and virgin brides. Each topic is looked at with the latest knowledge and discoveries being described, and there is plenty to surprise the old hands who have maybe read and studied their favourite topic for many years.

I for one was thoroughly absorbed in the chapter describing the use of the comb for communication, the idea that the structure could become some sort of "comb-wide-web", that not only the well described "waggle dance", is part of communication, but there may be some sort of telephone type network, is fascinating.

Another area that drew my attention was the way that various holes in the comb, not occupied by sealed grubs, are used in raising the comb temperature. Previous suggestions about these holes in the comb were that they were where grubs had been removed because of possible inbreeding. Another theory when bees are seen resting in the holes is that bees were sleeping in them. In this study they are seen using body temperature to warm adjoining cells. Superb pictures again illustrate what is actually happening in the hive. This is shown through thermal images.

An interesting idea and one that we no doubt will see more of in future, is the construction of a website to go along with the book. This will contain information and background material for each chapter, and will be updated at intervals to maintain "State of the art", for this book.

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this book for beekeepers and interested readers alike. This may be just what the beekeeper in your life may like under the Xmas tree!