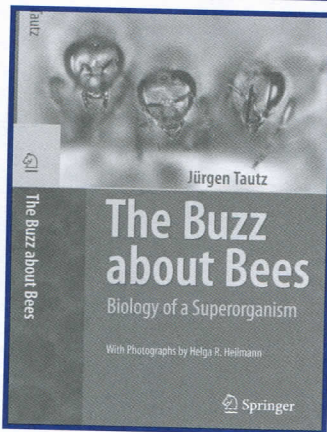


Book Review

The Buzz about Bees – Jürgen Tautz

In some ways The Buzz about Bees – the Biology of a Superorganism by Jürgen Tautz (with photographs by Helga Heilman and translated from German by David Sandeman; Second printing 2009; published by Springer; ISBN 978-3-540-78727-3) is not an easy read, but rarely have I come across a book on the honey bee that so richly rewards the effort of careful study.



This is a quite an extraordinary book in so many ways. It is one of the best produced books that I have read for a long time and the quality of the accompanying photographs is exceptional. The review copy of the book was a second edition – being a translation from the German first edition – and with a few exceptions the translation is excellent. The text is lucid and direct with very little wasted space or unnecessary comment. The German Preface to the first edition is included and in that Preface some words of Karl Von Frisch are quoted 'The honey bee colony is like a magic well; the more one removes from it, the stronger it flows.' This book does more to reveal some of the many secrets of the 'magic well' than almost any other book on the honey bee that the reviewer has read.

The central theme of the book is that a honey bee colony should be regarded as a superorganism - i.e. considering a bee colony as a single 'being' – a single integrated living organism.

The book is jammed packed full of facts about the individual actions of the honey bee and the combined activities of the honey bee colony. There are many gems in this book and there is much that was new to the reviewer – examples of which are almost too numerous to list. The chapter on the colour perception of the honey bee is one such example. Others include the fact that bees usually land against the prevailing wind; that flowers leave an 'empty' signal to tell bees that working other plants would be more profitable; that the hive contains several distinct and chemically marked dance floors for those bees that dance upon to indicate potential nectar sources; that new bees that have been recruited as the result of the waggle dance are led to the source by more

experienced bees; that certain bees act as the vital functions as 'heater' bees to warm the sealed brood and that these bees also climb into cells that have been specifically left empty to assist with warming brood in adjacent cells; that because of the frames beekeepers use to mount foundation attenuate the vibrations that bees use to communicate within the colony, the bees often remove sections of the foundation around the edges of the frame to enable the comb to vibrate better; that bees add propolis to the rims of cells to 'tune' the vibration of the comb and to reinforce the cell structure. The author lists nine different functions of the comb – including its use as part of a 'telephone system'.

This book contains the clearest description of the various actions of a swarm that the reviewer has read and the chapter on the collection of nectar and pollen is a model of clarity and precision. The facts just keep pouring out – that the average colony produces 300kg of honey per year which requires 7.5 million excursions by bees – amounting to 20 million kilometres flown by the bees in a single year; that it takes 25 flights to fill a single cell; that 20-30kg of pollen is collected each year – as the result of 2 million foraging flights.

The reviewer's understanding of bee biology was greatly expanded by reading this book and it has also resulted in a complete re-think of his understanding of the behaviour of bees. It has also evoked a greater sense of wonder and awe at the remarkable product of evolution that is the honey bee.

At the heart of this book is the plea that all those interested in honey bees should not just consider the individual bee, but rather the individual as part of a superorganism which is much more than the simple sum of all its parts. It is an outstanding book that all should make the effort to read.

Dr Stephen Palmer, FRGS FLS

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29th January 2011

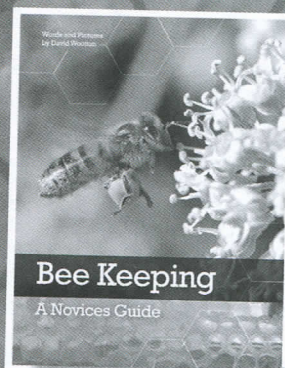
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Varroa



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