ISSUE 77, DECEMBER 2025

Apiarist's Advocate

News, Views & Promotions - for Beekeepers - by Beekeepers

Time to Go Hard on Hornets

Before time runs out on eradication hopes

Yellow Legged Hornet Response – Time to "Go Hard"

What started as a find of two male yellow-legged hornets in Auckland over winter has morphed into more than 20 sightings of queen hornets and over a dozen nests in the city. If New Zealand is to have any chance of eradicating the bee-predators then the collective actions of Biosecurity New Zealand, beekeepers and the wider community over the next month is critical, so say those advising the response leadership.

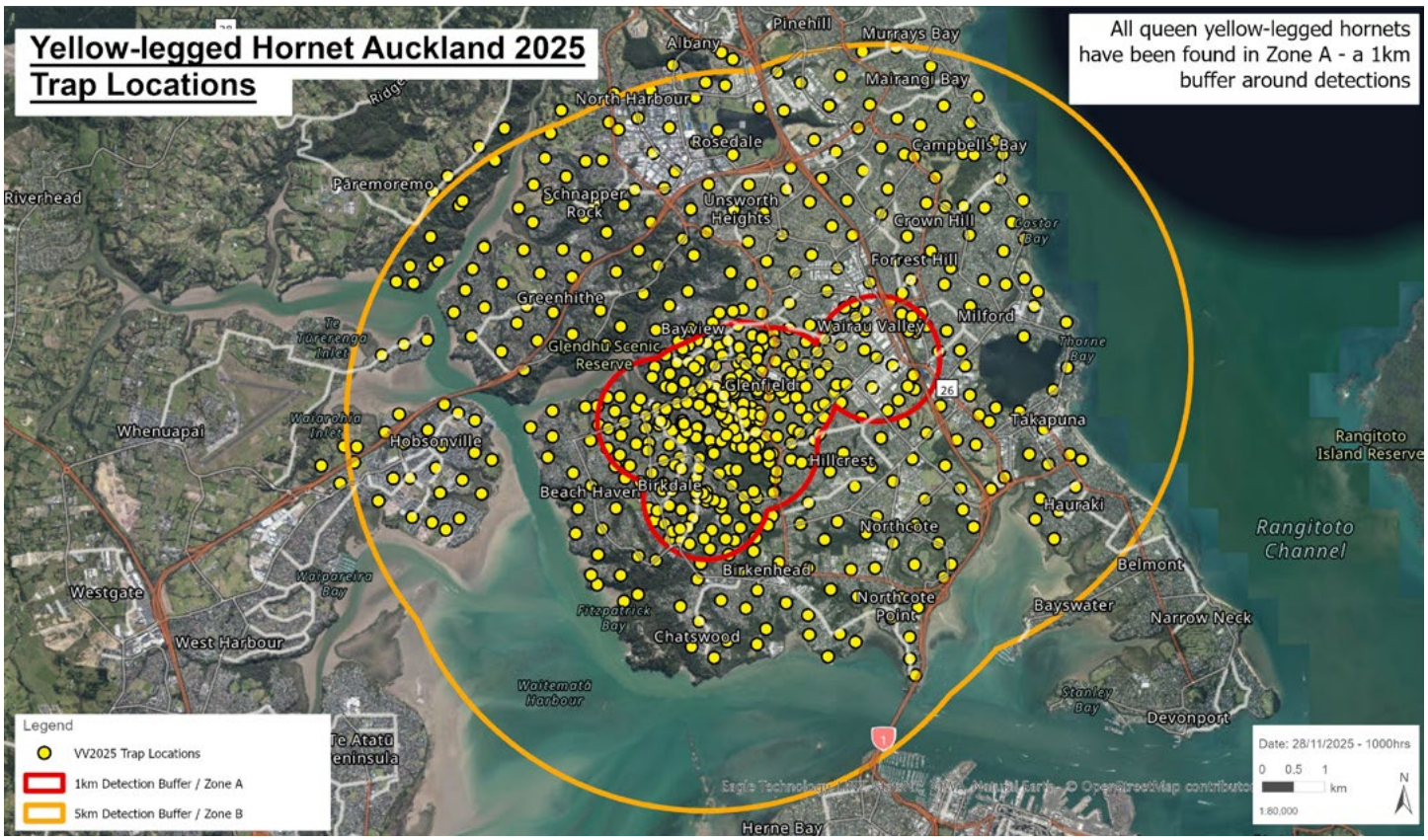
Plenty of hornet nests are still being found and that concerns the leader of Biosecurity New Zealand's independent, technical advisory group, Prof. Phil Lester. Soon, as the hornets head for new homes in the tree tops, finding any remaining colonies will be much more difficult. That's why more serious delimiting action is needed, before it soon could be too late, Lester warns.

"The teams on the ground are doing a fantastic job. They are finding nests. We should be applauding them and encouraging them," Lester says.

"The concern most of us would have is, the rate of nest discovery is not declining. We are still seeing new nests found and an increasing rate of discovery in Auckland. That is not what we want to see, we want to see the rate of nest discovery declining so we are only finding a new nest every few days or weeks. What that tells me is, we need to do more. We need more teams on the ground searching as those teams are now."

In November the Ministry for Primary Industries' (MPI) response was based on a five-kilometre radius zone centred around the Auckland suburb of Glenfield, where the first queen hornet was located in October. Inside the zone trapping for the hornets and visual inspection of likely nesting areas has taken place, resulting in finds of 27 queen hornets and 17 nests, as of November 29.

Come January and February these smaller 'embryo' nests will be abandoned by many of their inhabitants with new homes sought in largely much less visible and accessible places, and the colony



Trap locations as at 29 November 2025 (yellow dots). All queen yellow-legged hornets have been found in Zone A (red circle) – a 1km buffer around detections.

will turn to producing more queens with which to breed from. For that reason, taking effective action in December is critical to a successful response according to Lester.

"We have a window of opportunity to find those nests and nail them. They will move up into the trees in a little bit. About 70% of nests relocate … From there they will potentially get more difficult to discover because they are high in tree canopies at times and hidden quite well."

The Victoria University of Wellington expert on biosecurity specialises in invasive wasps and has been tasked with chairing a technical advisory group by MPI, made up of domestic and international yellow-legged hornet experts.

Crucial to the next month is more intensive delimitation surveys, to determine how far the hornets may have dispersed from what is believed to be their point of entry in Auckland.

"The primary focus has to be around what is going on in Auckland and that area. They have bait stations and traps to five kilometres now. There are arguments to be made that it should go out further than that. Auckland motorway is nearby, and that is a real problem. If they got onto a truck there, we would have no idea where they might end up after that," Lester says.

THE BEEKEEPERS' ROLE

For that reason, New Zealand's beekeepers are being encouraged to conduct "active and regular surveillance of hives" to attempt to determine the presence of the hornets and compliment the intensive activity in Auckland.

Prof. Phil Lester is leading an advisory group to Biosecurity NZ urging them to urgently throw more resource at the yellow legged hornet incursion response, before it might soon be too late.

While limited in what resources can be applied to the response due to their work being restricted to American foulbrood control, New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity (NZBB) have distributed advice to all registered beekeepers, asking them to both visually monitor apiary sites for signs of hornets, and to set traps (more information can be found at the conclusion of this article).

National-level beekeeping groups Apiculture New Zealand (ApiNZ) and New Zealand Beekeeping Inc (NZBI) have been meeting, along with NZBB, with the Minister for Biosecurity, Andrew Hoggard, and MPI.

ApiNZ CEO Karin Kos says they, like Lester and the independent advisory group MPI has tasked him with leading, are imploring the government to throw more resources at an incursion that could have huge impacts on beekeeping in New Zealand.

"It was a slow start but as soon as we were able to initiate a few regular meetings and speak to the Minister, they have picked up the pace," Kos says.

"We just need more resources thrown at this, more urgency and they need to look at taking the surveillance further and broader."

Together with NZBI and NZBB Kos has met with the Biosecurity Minister and his team.

"We have had to push a little bit, but they certainly have stepped up and are really responsive and come back to us quickly. Myself, Ian (Fletcher) and Niha (Long) have worked really closely together and tag-teaming those conversations, having the meetings with the Minister, attending daily meetings with MPI and Biosecurity New Zealand, that is what you have to do to keep the pedal to the metal."

It is not just about Biosecurity New Zealand's efforts either, with the role of beekeepers not to be underestimated the ApiNZ CEO says.

"It is all hands on deck when something like this hits … The point I have made to the Minister is, beekeepers are here to help and want to be part of any response. It is in their best interests to keep it out, so use this very important group. Use them for advice, but also use them to help.

"Is it too late? That I can't answer, but we need to play our part to be better prepared," Kos says.

BEING BETTER PREPARED

The apiculture industry's unpreparedness for biosecurity incursions had been a hot topic even prior to the yellow-legged hornet outbreak. Most other primary industries are entered into Government Industry Agreements (GIAs) with central government which set out plans for incursion responses and cost sharing. The beekeeping industry has held off making such a commitment, with there being doubts about how effective elimination of common honey bee pests and diseases can be once they enter the country.

A primary or embryo yellow-legged hornet nest. Come January it is believed most remaining nests of this type will be replaced by larger, more remote nests, making eradication efforts over the next month critical.

NZBB chief executive Niha Long has worked on incursion responses for many pests and diseases, including fruit fly in 2019 and as a senior operations manager in the Mycoplasma bovis response in cattle which entered the country in 2017. She believes the yellow-legged hornet response would have been greatly improved thus far, had the beekeeping industry had a GIA in place. As it stands, NZBB's resources are limited to tackling American foulbrood, so their "formal involvement" in the hornet response has been negligible, but they have been facilitating conversations and providing beekeepers with information.

"GIA membership would provide voting rights and a say in operational decisions that directly affect our industry," Long says.

"It would also provide opportunities to participate in readiness activities, such as incursion simulation and scenario planning."

By way of comparison, Australian beekeepers pay an annual 'Emergency Plant Pest Response' levy amounting to AU1c per kilogram of honey sold for those selling more than 1,500kg of honey a year. This money is targeted to biosecurity responses and has been set for the next six years, with hopes of paying back debt incurred following the varroa incursion since 2022. Alongside this, a larger 2.8c/kg 'biosecurity activities' levy is collected each year, to fund ongoing biosecurity education and initiatives, many delivered collaboratively with Plant Health Australia.

Kos says, regardless of funds, a lack of preparedness has slowed the current response to yellow-legged hornets.

"We don't have preparedness plans. A GIA was our (ApiNZ) preference originally, and I still think is – which can be a point of difference with some others, but at least under a GIA you are working with partners who will be impacted by similar issues and you have to develop preparedness plans," Kos says.

"If we had had something in place we would have been able to run and test scenarios, and everyone have an emergency plan in the back pocket. And, as an industry, take some responsibility. For me, it has always been a frustration not having that in place and this is an example of what happens when you don't, everyone is scrambling for a response."

Even without a GIA, Lester says once two male hornets were discovered in June and July he warned MPI they needed to be prepared to launch a major response come spring. That response has been slow.

"It would have been wise to get ourselves better prepared to look. We wouldn't have been able to look in June or July because the queens would have been hibernating, but we could have got prepared to do more," Lester says.

WHAT MATTERS NOW

Hindsight is 20:20 vision though the wasp expert says and what really matters now is how effective delimitation and eradication efforts are over the next month. After that there is one thing working in our favour, with the pest's protein requirements then becoming higher and thus the colonies more susceptible to fipronil-laced Vespex bait.

That is a useful tool in the toolbox Lester says, but extra resource put towards elimination now will be well spent.

"There is competence there and a desire to do the hard work, but we need to ramp it up as much as we can and that is certainly the advice being given by the technical advisory group. Go hard, go early," he says, adding, "More could be done".

Beekeepers are encouraged to visit MPI's yellow-legged hornet response webpage, here, where there is information specifically for beekeepers regarding FAQs and information; a beekeepers' guide to surveillance; and a beekeepers' guide to trapping.

Asian Hornets – Time for MPI to Up Their Game

What to make of the hornet incursion response so far? Ian Fletcher has been among those advising the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) from the beekeeping industry's perspective. He reports on a programme that has so far relied too much on hope, may be continuing to do so and that "the lack of a grip on this issue should concern us all".

BY IAN FLETCHER

I've spent much of the last month engaging with MPI, beekeepers and with Apiculture New Zealand (ApiNZ) on the Asian hornet (aka yellow-legged hornet) incursion. This month I'm setting out what I've learned and what seems to me to be some lessons to learn, and things to get better. At the outset, let me say that New Zealand Beekeeping Inc (who I represent) and ApiNZ have worked closely and entirely cooperatively on this.

If Asian hornets get established in New Zealand they will spread across the whole country. They are efficient predators and they will have a happy time – like wasps. Phil Lester's book *The Vulgar Wasp* has been a great introduction for me into the science around social insects like wasps and hornets. Fascinating, and worrying.

The economic, environmental and human impact will be very serious. These hornets will systematically hunt honey bees (and other insects). Hive losses in Europe to hornet predation look to average around 30 percent per year, in addition to varroa losses and American foulbrood. Unsurprisingly, weaker hives get hit hardest. It's not clear what that would eventually look like in New Zealand, but it won't be trivial.

That will affect pollination. I don't know how that will work exactly (hornets may go after bees after the peak pollination periods, allowing beekeepers to disperse hives). But it will be expensive, and complicated. Honey production will be affected, with lower yields and

Biosecurity Minister Andrew Hoggard has been urged by beekeeping groups to improve MPI's incursion response to yellow-legged hornets (aka Asian hornets).

higher costs. And Asian hornets will hit amenity values – it'll be less fun going into the bush, and there will be stings, attacks and the occasional fatality. We don't want any of that. Eradication is essential, everyone agrees.

So, on the ground, what's happening? MPI and its contractors have put a lot of traps around the cluster of finds so far, and engaged in searches of properties where hornets have been found. Hornets are mainly being found by searches (workers have yet to emerge, so trapping catch will pick up soon).

Ian Flethcer, now advising NZBI, and a past biosecurity expert with Queensland's Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation.

The danger (matching overseas reports) is that we find hornets where we look, and we miss those where we don't look. MPI report that it's hard to search scrub, bush and broken country. So it is, but we should urge MPI to be both energetic and innovative: we need to find ways to search dense vegetation and broken country. Waiting for workers to emerge, and following them home (the current idea) seems to me to be a kind of gambling. Hope is not a policy.

I'm also concerned that using contractors may mean MPI's insight into conditions on the ground may be less granular than it ought to be. This may be a counsel of perfection, or just paranoia. But only the paranoid survive, as the saying goes.

So far, the number of queens found keeps rising. This trend, more than anything else, is what scientists are worried about. If queen discoveries are increasing, it suggests the population is spread further than MPI has so far detected – that we don't really know the boundaries of the incursion.

Outside the immediate zone, trapping is left to individuals, including beekeepers. Yet we know (and the Minister has said) that hitchhiking on human transport is the way these hornets spread. I consider we have to assume they have spread beyond the immediate area. Systematic, organised national surveillance might look like over-reaction, until we find a queen or two happily setting up home in Temuka, or Levin, or wherever. We need to urge MPI to

mount both a stronger tactical game around the current finds, and a coherent national surveillance programme.

NZBI and Apiculture NZ have been urging this from the outset. The lack of grip on this issue should concern us all.

MPI has – rightly – set up a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) of scientists and relevant experts to help. It's met, er, once. It meets again on Thursday 4 December. I'm told it will be asked to review MPI's work and look ahead to the late-summer and autumn phases. Sensible. But meeting every now and then is just not enough. Scientific advice needs to be integrated into the daily management of any fast-moving response like this, with short feedback loops and a clear mandate to offer challenge and support right where it matters. Instead, the TAG is sporadic, and off to one side. This is a blunder.

Meanwhile the GIA "governance group" has been meeting without NZBI present (NZBI, and me personally, refused to sign the NDA which would have prevented me writing this article). ApiNZ has attended. We are told they will soon start looking at "contingency planning" for the rest of this year and for future years. At one level this is sensible; at another it risks the response slowing down and changing into a management plan. We know how successful that can be. Beekeepers need a real voice at this table.

MPI's slow communications and rigid hierarchies have also been a drag on the wider response. Fast-moving biosecurity threats need fast-moving information sharing and flexible structures. Reassuring press releases don't actually change the facts, and may lead to complacency. The hornets don't read the news, they just get on with breeding.

New Zealand does not yet know how widespread Asian hornets are. We are operating with partial visibility (inevitable at this stage) and slow and disconnected processes. The number of queens found is rising. It sounds an exaggeration to see this as a potential national economic emergency, but we face a serious cumulative economic and environmental drag from hornets, wasps, varroa, AFB and other diseases. A profound, slow-growing change in the operating environment is just as serious for beekeepers.

Beekeepers need to stay engaged, stay informed, and keep pressing for stronger, smarter action.

This is not a short fight. But with unity across the industry, sober public messages, and pressure on MPI to lift its game, we can still get ahead of this threat. Maybe.

Ian Fletcher is a former head of New Zealand's security agency, the GCSB, chief executive of the UK Patents Office, free trade negotiator with the European Commission and biosecurity expert for the Queensland government. These days he is a commercial flower grower in the Wairarapa and consultant to the apiculture industry with NZ Beekeeping Inc.

"Agreement in Principle" for New Beekeeping Group

Industry groups Apiculture New Zealand (ApiNZ) and New Zealand Beekeeping Inc (NZBI) have found themselves distracted by the unwelcome yellow-legged hornet incursion response in the last month, but some small progress towards a more united industry body has been made they say.

Beekeepers would surely have no qualms about ApiNZ CEO Karin Kos and NZBI advisor Ian Fletcher admitting that moving plans for a potential new national beekeeping industry body forward was not priority number one in November.

It was hoped that a draft constitution might be provided to a small group of industry members to review by now, but that timeframe looks to have moved into December as meetings between ApiNZ, NZBI, and often with New Zealand Bee Health and Biosecurity (NZBB) chief executive Niha Long, have been focused on the yellow-legged hornet recently.

"We have still made progress and bringing several groups together it does highlight how we do work well together and I need to recognise the efforts of Niha and Ian in that process. It shows the importance in having a united industry body," Kos says.

Both the ApiNZ CEO and NZBI's Fletcher says they have "agreement in principle" over two issues that have proven contentious regarding a potential new industry body, namely the role of corporate beekeeping businesses and also how existing groups might be affiliated to any new body.

"We have made progress. There were those couple of sticking points, but I think we have an agreement in principle. We found a way through. We are now going back to our respective boards and I am cautiously optimistic we will have something to go out to an advisory group in the next week or two," Kos says.

After a draft constitution is put in front of a selected group of industry stakeholders, it is expected to go out to the wider industry for consultation before any potential implementation.

Comvita & the China Brick Road

In the film the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy walks a yellow brick road to the Emerald Castle in search of a wizard. In China, Comvita appears to have embarked upon a kindred quest to the cave of a dragon. Although both reach their destination, neither wizard nor dragon deliver on the hopes held for them, and Comvita learns that dragons do not live forever. Bruce Roscoe traces Comvita's China sojourn, compiles a damage report, and asks, where to now?

BY BRUCE ROSCOE

China appears to be unravelling as Comvita's largest — and New Zealand's second-largest — market for mānuka honey and related products. Demons can be seen pulling on threads from opposing directions, reducing the garments of the world's largest mānuka honey producer to gardening wear.

The big picture is daunting. Consumer confidence is ebbing. Families, anxious over future security, are saving rather than spending. Moreover, efforts to stimulate consumption "often overlook deeper structural issues, including the prolonged real estate crisis…", according to analysis published by *East Asia Forum* in August.

China is "trapped in a cycle of deflation", *Geopolitical Intelligence Services* stated in a January report. "Recent economic indicators suggest that the country's economy is likely to stay stuck in a deflationary cycle for another two years". Deflation persisted amid consumer demand weakness.

On the street and online, structural changes are afoot. "As new consumers want value for money more than ever, the channel structure has changed, giving rise to new … membership and

Cartoon generated by ChatGPT.

discount-based models" for the food and beverage industry, states KPMG Advisory (China) in a September report. In a section noting buzzwords that are taking hold among consumers, the report ominously includes "downmarket".

"China now is somewhere around the status of a Brazil — big, important but difficult," CNN has quoted Anne Stevenson-Yang, co-founder of J Capital Research, as having said. "The economy is not reverting to the poverty levels of the 1980s, but there is a lot of dialling back being done."

Such sea changes have contributed to plunging Comvita's China (including Hong Kong) sales NZD31.8m from the NZD109.0m achieved in the 2023 peak year to NZ77.2m for the June 2025 year. In its latest annual report, Comvita resolves to address China "legacy challenges around ageing inventory and distributor management".

STRESS FRACTURES IN THE FOUNDATION

Although Comvita turned 50 years old in 2024, it launched itself on the world stage in earnest at age 30, when it shed parochialism and announced itself as a brand of global aspiration by changing its name to Comvita Ltd from Comvita New Zealand Ltd. Sales had topped NZD20m the year before, and within 20 years would exceed NZD200m.

"First sales into new Chinese market" was ranked sixth in the list of "performance highlights", below "Comvita Japan records maiden profit of $49,000" in Comvita's annual report for the December 2005 year. Comvita had located its "Comvita Asia Ltd" subsidiary in Hong Kong. This subsidiary was first incorporated in New Zealand and, as though Comvita viewed the world through a

colonial looking glass, was entered directly under United Kingdom on the company directory page of the annual report. China was unnoted, yet in the city of Shenzhen that borders Hong Kong to the south on the east bank of the Pearl River, a partnership was forming that would become Comvita's locomotive of growth.

In Shenzhen in 2004, Guangping Zhu established Shenzhen Comvita Natural Food Co. Ltd. From this base he, his wife Li Wang, and office manager Li Sun trailblazed Comvita's distribution in China. Comvita acquired 51% of their company in July 2017, renamed it Comvita Food (China) Ltd, and added a Hong Kong unit, which it incorporated as Comvita China Ltd (and in various reports casually abbreviates both companies to "Comvita China"). In a perpetual confusion, Comvita HK Ltd remains as a discrete entity.

Swayed by the NZD40.0m in sales and NZD8.6m in pretax profits that "Comvita China" chalked up in the June 2018 year, Comvita moved to acquire the remaining 49% of the venture in June 2018.

Comvita had paid for the acquisition by issuing its own shares in two tranches — 2.83m shares (approx. value NZD16.4m) and 4.05m shares (NZD12.3m). The implied share prices were NZD5.80 and NZD3.40. The cash component that Comvita paid was only NZD3.19m. The shares were issued to the owners and principals of Shenzhen Comvita Natural Food Co. Ltd — Guangping Zhu (who owned 80%) and Li Sun (20%). Mr Zhu's majority portion was assigned to Ms Wang, who through earlier purchases of Comvita shares had first appeared on the company's top-20 shareholder list in April 2011 with a holding of 500,000 shares or 1.7% of the company.

Recent Trend in Bulk Monofloral Mānuka Honey Exports (tonnes; NZD thousands)

All markets	Volume	Value	NZD/kg
20241Q-3Q	1,052	27,278	25.94
2025 1Q-3Q	1,237	28,726	23.22
% chg y.o.y.	17.6	5.3	(10.5)
US	Volume	Value	NZ/kg
20241Q-3Q	88.8	3,570	40.18
2025 1Q-3Q	83.3	2,570	30.85
% chg y.o.y.	(6.2)	(28.0)	(23.2)
China(a)	Volume	Value	NZ/kg
20241Q-3Q	46.8	1,897	40.56
2025 1Q-3Q	51.4	1,296	25.20
% chg y.o.y.	8.1	(34.1)	(37.8)

Note: (a)Includes Hong Kong
Source: Statistics New Zealand

Ms Wang built up her holding to 2.8 million shares or 6.3% of Comvita. After Comvita acquired the company her husband had founded in Shenzhen, Ms Wang's holding climbed to 8.3m shares, elevating her to largest shareholder with a stake of 16.8%. She remained largest shareholder as at 30 June 2025, though her holding had been diluted to 12.1% as a result of new share issues by Comvita. Ms Sun at that date held 1.41 million shares (2.0%).

After things went south up north, Comvita began a "review of distribution arrangements" as part of a "China reset", according to the company's 2025 year annual report. Soon after, in response to attempts by Comvita co-founder Alan Bougen and former chair Neil Craig to scupper the proposed takeover by Florenz Ltd for NZc 80 per share, Ms Wang conducted her own review.

In a statement released 10 November, Ms Wang declared: "We do not believe the current management team can turn around the company's performance". This was an extraordinary rebuke from an insider who had pretty much seen it all, through thick and thin. "The business falling into the hands of receivers is a distinct possibility, particularly if the business in China does not rapidly improve", Ms Wang warned. Comvita announced on 18 November that Mr Zhu was ending his six-year tenure as a director.

WHERE TO NOW?

Comvita, a pioneer in China, also spearheaded discount selling in the US. As the central plank in an effort to lessen dependence on the China market, Comvita began wholesaling mānuka honey to the buyers' club discount chain Costco Wholesale Corp. in early 2018. The rollout was to 200 warehouses throughout the US and Canada. Typically at Costco, pallets are forklifted to a warehouse floor. Pallet and cartoon design enables shoppers to remove a jar directly from a carton. Less than a dollar-a-can peaches or tomatoes or other cut-price commodity are likely seen on a side-opened pallet alongside the discounted mānuka. A Comvita management insider told this writer he was talked down when he opposed the diversification as brand-damaging.

Other mānuka honey packers, similarly flush with inventory, followed Comvita's lead by pushing into so-called big-box US retail chains on lantern paper-thin margins. Retail-pack mono-floral mānuka honey was exported to the US at NZD43.48 per kilogram in CY2024, 21.9% less than the average NZD55.70 for exports in the same category to China (including Hong Kong).

The year after Comvita took on board Shenzhen Comvita Natural Food Co., China accounted for 15.7% of total sales (June 2019 year: NZD26.9m of NZD178.5m). That weighting grew to 46.5% in the June 2023 peak China year (NZD109.0m of NZD234.2m). The 2024- and 2025-year weightings were 43.0% and 40.1%. Actual dependency may be as high as 60.0%, Comvita believes, when Chinese travellers and Chinese residents of the broader Asian region are included.

If Comvita, which by volume accounts for about half the mānuka honey industry, becomes marginalized in China, still New Zealand's second-largest market for retail-pack monofloral mānuka honey, the damage is likely to travel underwater like a tsunami to engulf other markets, which would fill with large volumes at fire-sale prices to clear inventory. Destabilisation and further commoditisation would result.

Or China may increase imports of bulk monofloral mānuka honey for packing under Chinese brands. It has already developed a taste for bulk mānuka, as indicated in the table in this report. And it seems to have learned that not much needs to be paid for

it (NZD25.21/kg in CY2025 1Q-3Q, down 37.8% from the CY2024 same-period price of NZD40.56/kg).

ALL THAT GLITTERS

A lion, scarecrow, and tin man accompany Dorothy on her journey along the yellow brick road to the Emerald Castle. Witches — one to the east, another to the west — are in the fray. Readers may enjoy assigning these characters to real-life figures in the mānuka honey industry.

But the book upon which the musical fantasy film is only loosely based, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, is authoritatively interpreted as an allegory that illuminates the late 1800s' argument in the US that the gold standard oppressed the poor. In this view, the yellow of the brick road is a metaphor for gold. The yellow of Comvita's China road perhaps turns more the Shakespearean glitter seen in Venice.

Word plays aside, a reconsidered future for mānuka honey in China stands hope on its head. As home to a centuries-old tradition of herbal medicine and the world's largest honey producer, China should perhaps be the most receptive of all markets to mānuka honey. The falling away of this market after such a quick-fire ascent may signal that the purported benefits of the honey have not lived up to their billing. Rather than having been misunderstood in terms of efficacy against certain health conditions, the present danger may be that mānuka honey in China has been understood.

Great store had been placed in China as a valued market for mānuka honey even by the Ministry for Primary Industries, which supplied a letter in support of the Manuka Honey Appellation Society's applications in China for a certification trademark for the words "manuka honey". Rejection of the first application, filed in February 2016, was unsuccessfully appealed to the Beijing Higher People's Court. In sum, NZD506,893 was spent on the China effort, the second highest country total after the NZD637,643 spent on the trademark case in the UK, according to MHAS accounts.

SUPERSTITION & MORTALITY

Twelve creatures represent the years in the cyclical Chinese zodiac. Only the dragon among them is unreal.

The superstitious among us may pause to consider that Comvita returned its most traumatic losses ever following the close in early 2025 of the Year of the Dragon, which gave way to the Year of the Snake.

Chinese dragons, unlike their mythical counterparts in other lands, are regal with deep associations to emperors past. They are harbingers of good fortune. Like wizards, they are endowed with magical powers. But the wizard in the Emerald Castle was shown to be human, and the dragon at whose feet Comvita bowed in China is revealing equal mortality.

Bruce Roscoe is a Japan-resident researcher and former foreign correspondent and securities analyst.

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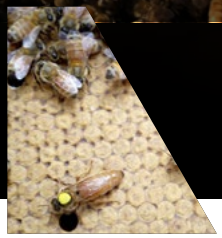

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Vespa? Scoot on Over...

It's looking more and more likely that the people of New Zealand are destined for co-habitation with yellow-legged hornets as more and more discoveries are announced around Auckland. What would we be in for should they become established – from their behaviours to how they might impact the country's economy – and what control methods do we have at our disposal?

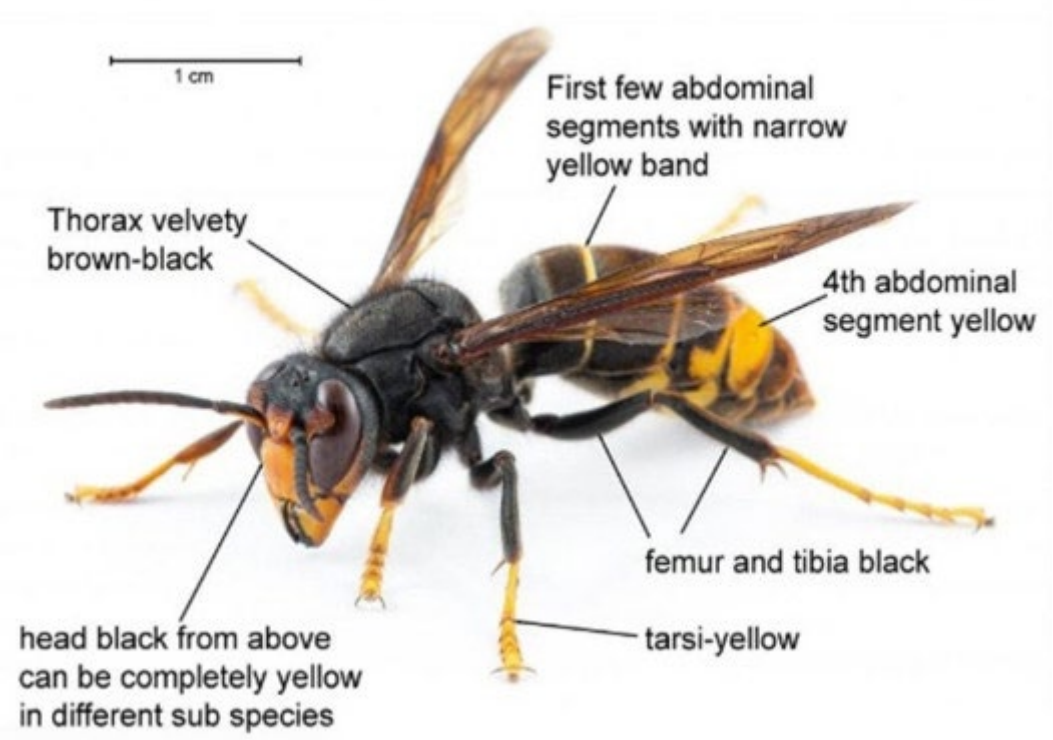
BY DAVE BLACK

Since June 2025, according to MPI, Biosecurity New Zealand have confirmed a number of detections of the yellow-legged hornet (*Vespa velutina*) across Auckland. First described in 1836 by the French entomologist Amédée Louis Michel Lepeletier in his *Histoire Naturelle des Insectes—Hyménoptères*, in July two male yellow-legged hornets were spotted in the Auckland suburbs of Grafton and Albany, apparently resting on the outside of buildings. No nests were located.

Like our local *Vespa* wasp species mating occurs in autumn and queens overwinter, so further sightings of locally-resident hornets would not be expected until Spring was under way. Almost right on cue, on October 17 a queen hornet was confirmed nesting in Glenfield, the nest being removed and destroyed the same day.

Two more sightings followed. It seems there are still more to be discovered (with 27 queens, two workers and 17 nests reported at time of writing, November 28); my money is on an over-wintered nest that has produced fertile queens.

Originally from South-east Asia the natural range of *V. velutina* extends from Kashmir to Taiwan, and south to Java and Timor. In parts of its native range these hornets are cultivated and managed for food and medicinal products in similar ways to bumble bees and other hymenoptera. The sub-species found here is a descendent of a continental group of hornets nearly all of which live in China, from which it has been accidentally introduced into South Korea, Europe and Japan. *V. velutina* is considered a threat to these ecosystems because of its predation on insect pollinators, but brings a more diverse set of ecological and



It's not just the yellow legs which give away the yellow-legged hornet's identity.

economic implications. There is no reason why this hornet could not colonise any of the regions in New Zealand already home to our other invasive wasp species.

POKING A HORNET'S NEST

Hornets are predatory social wasps, one of the many varieties of Vespa (Vespidae), several of which interact with honey bees. The only species specifically adapted to predate honey bees are the eight sub-species of the under-ground-nesting giant hornet *V. mandarinia*, but many hornets, and *V. velutina* is one, eat honey bees as a part of their diet. Because the Auckland finds are being described as 'yellow-legged', open-nesting Asian hornets, we can infer that we are dealing with *Vespa velutina nigrithorax* to give its full name, and among other things that tells us where in the world it originated.

Separating hornet types is a job for specialists, especially when the specimens can often be damaged or incomplete. Size is not a good guide, to either type or caste, as it's highly dependent on an individual's natal conditions, but most hornets are a little larger than a queen bee. Colour is not an infallible guide to species, but dark, 'smoky' wings are quite characteristic of all hornets, and the general body shape definitely more Ferrari than Fiat.

The naming and identification of the various sub-species is still evolving and actively debated, but around 12-17 subtly different types of *V. velutina* are described in the scientific literature, the features of which get all blended into a savage 'super-wasp' in the public imagination. Popular videos of 'Asian' hornets usually feature the particularly aggressive and ferocious *V. mandarina*, but many hornet species have made the 'most not wanted' list for invasive animals.

WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?

In a recent French survey of food pellets supplied by 12,200 hornets to 16 nests (2,151 pellets) *velutina* was characterised as an opportunistic generalist predator, preying mainly on honeybees (38.1 %), flies (29.9 %), and social wasps (19.7 %), but at least 159 prey species were found in total. As we might expect, there was some variation that depended on what prey was available, so the 'catch' depended on, for example, whether the habitat was agricultural or forested, time of day, and of season. This dietary adaptability is actually one of the keys to it being such a successful species and what permits it to invade new habitats. While they will eat your bees, they will also eat the wasps that were going to eat your bees later, or anything else that comes to hand.

V. velutina are known to use scent to detect distant feeding opportunities, and a different French group have studied this in more detail. Rather than noticing bees, these hornets are attracted by the scents from bees' nests. In multiple choice tests performed as a controlled laboratory assay, the research found that the

hornets are strongly attracted to the odour of some hive products, especially pollen and honey. The smell of honey bees themselves was only marginally attractive.

When testing specific compounds, the honey bee's aggregation pheromone, 'geraniol' produced by the nasonov gland, proved highly attractive. Also, the synthetic honeybee queen mandibular pheromone, Beeboost, was somewhat interesting and prolonged visit duration. Surprisingly, alarm pheromones did not elicit much response. What hornets are looking for, it seems, is an area of high prey density, rather than the prey itself.

ON THE MOVE

V. velutina construct more than one nest in a season, possibly as a strategy to mitigate the limitation of having a single individual found the colony. The first 'primary' nest, or queen colony, is made by the solitary queen in the spring, and it's the quality of this nest, in terms of brood raised, that sets up the overall seasonal reproductive success of the colony – or not, many fail. Once brood production expands beyond the capacity of this initial nest workers search for better sites in the vicinity. The queen will subsequently abandon the nest she built and the workers will construct a new and larger secondary nest at her chosen site.

Once the queen has left it takes about a month for all the brood in the primary nest to reach adulthood and migrate to the secondary nest. This nest will grow full of workers during the summer and when mature can produce potentially several hundred queens and drones in the autumn. Over-wintering queens are not always successfully mated.

IT'S THE ECONOMY STUPID...

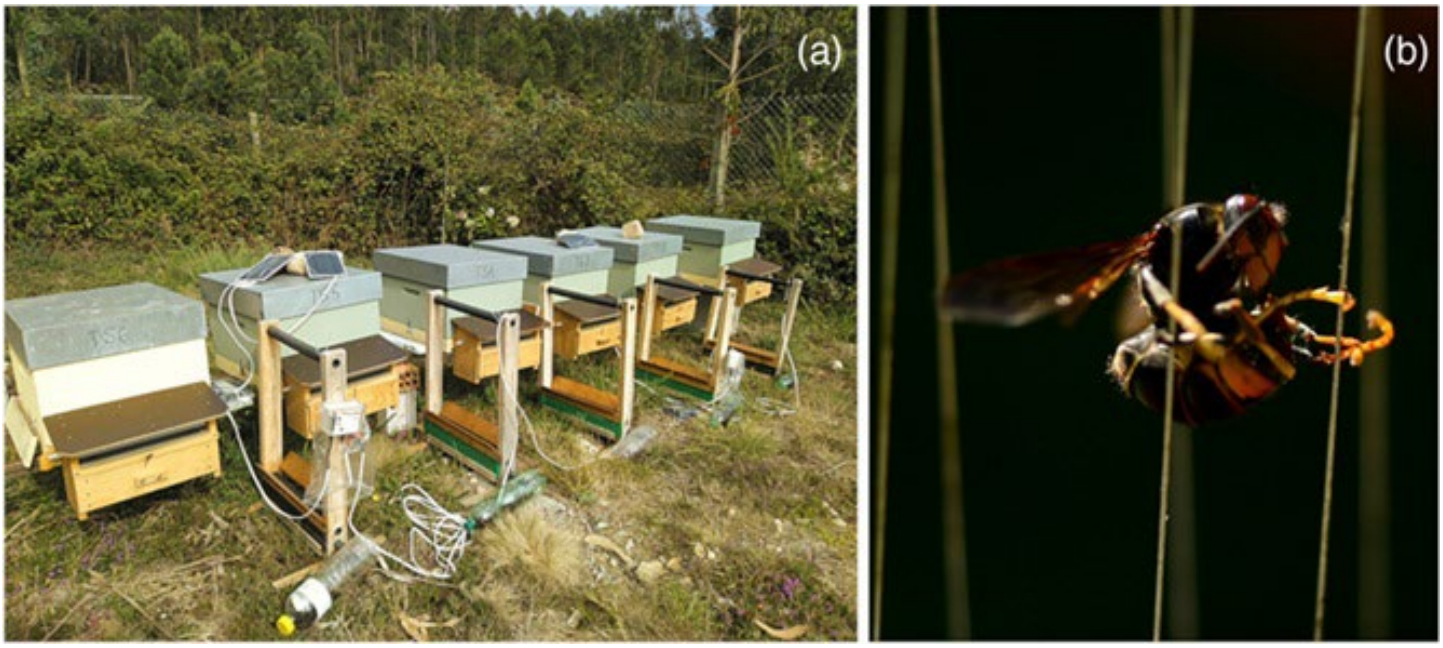
The impacts of hornets outside their native range are significant, besides the ecological harm, a permanent presence of hornets here will rock the food security boat and is likely to add an unwanted complication to export certification for our own producers. In economic terms there is the damage to bee colonies and honey production, and the concomitant damage to the yield of insect-pollinated crops, regardless of pollinator. The cost of mitigating these impacts by monitoring and controlling hornets – and destroying nests – for an indefinite period are also not insignificant. The effect on the balance of invertebrates in native ecosystems is mostly indeterminable, as is the cost of the 'by-catch' by control attempts. The actual *annual* cost of nest destruction alone has been estimated at around €10 million (NZD17m) each in France, Italy and the UK.

Hornets also benefit from a close association with human spaces in suburban and urban environments; primary nests especially are mainly reported in man-made structures as diverse as garages, light fixtures, and bird boxes, and adults are frequently found hunting near suburban apiaries. Humans have a habit of putting a lot of 'stuff' in a small area, which makes hunting for food more efficient. This natural proximity to hornets can pose a significant hazard for public safety.

The statistics we have to describe human injuries caused by these hornets are poor; insect-related fatalities are rare but not negligible. In China a number of deaths occur each year due to organ failure and the toxic effect of mass-envenomation after a multiple sting event. Like other hymenoptera, *V. velutina* are also responsible for fatal anaphylactic deaths and a Spanish university in Santiago de Compostela has reported an exponential increase in the proportion of allergic events involving *V. velutina*. They write; *"...considering the number of patients receiving venom immunotherapy, while 60.3% of 126 patients were being treated with Apis mellifera venom in 2015, 68.2% of 245 were being treated with Vespula spp venom in June 2019, the majority of them after suffering anaphylaxis due to VVN [Vespa velutina nigrithorax]"*.

Another report shows annual mortality rates due to hornet, wasp, and bee stings have shown an increasing trend in Spain over a 1999-2018 study period. This appears to be at least partially due

A yellow legged hornet, Vespa velutina, in the wild.



So far no trap, or trap-bait, has proved to be particularly effective, and all collect a considerable number of dead non-target species, including but not only honey bees. But electric "harps" such as setup in front of these six beehives have been used overseas.

to increases in regions where introduced hornets are found, and have been more profound in the ten or so years since the hornets arrived. The necessity to plan and fund changes to public health provision to respond to an elevated risk like this also takes time and money.

ACTION STATIONS...

A solution to all this will prove elusive. Finding and catching the invaders is difficult. Protecting beehives is possible to an extent, but protecting our other pollinating insects is not. People find it hard to avoid a flying insect which hides its nests. However, there are some useful lessons to be taken from years of overseas experience. The first lesson is, it only takes one. Eileen Dillane and her colleagues at University College in Cork, Ireland have presented genetic evidence that shows the entire European population of *V. velutina* (many millions of insects) has descended from the entry of a single queen twenty years ago .

Early detection of invasive species is essential, and most countries immediately established 'citizen-science' teams, involved beekeeper associations to gather observations, and tried using monitoring traps. Beekeepers are more adept, but there are too few of them. Border surveillance and local monitoring has had limited success, but prompt action in at least two jurisdictions has eliminated the incursions. However, the probability of seeing a hornet is low, even for beekeepers, who might spend quite a bit of time in their home apiary but visit out-apiaries sparingly.

CATCH AND RELEASE

The purpose of using traps is to catch (alive) and trace *velutina* individuals. None of the current traps are suitable as a control method, and their efficacy as a monitoring tool is quite limited unless it's combined with gene sequencing. As with Covid19, genetic tracing of all the finds has proved invaluable in other incursions, and can indicate how many nests we are looking for.

Current trapping methods are not particularly selective, and not very attractive (unless they are beehives!). Although a sex pheromone trap could be made, it would attract only males which isn't particularly helpful. So far no trap, or trap-bait, has proved to be particularly effective, and all collect a considerable number of dead non-target species, including but not only honey bees. So far, commercial products and baits don't seem to be any more effective or selective than DIY versions. In Brec't, (Brittany, northwestern France) the beekeepers' favourite recipe is said to consist of beer, grenadine syrup, and a splosh of white wine.

The key to repelling the intruders is the eradication of nests, preferably before they release inseminated queens, which is only

Honey bees defending the entrance of the hive during yellow-legged hornet attack.

possible if they can be found. Observations are used in a variety of ways to try and triangulate the location of nests using the 'homing' flight direction of captured individuals, but it needs systematic preparation, good data handling, training, a lot of sightings, and can take days if not weeks. Multiple nests confuse and defy triangulation. Odd things have been statistically associated with nests, the presence of camellia plants(!), and water (for papier-mache construction).

Thermal imaging has not proved to be very useful for locating nests. Harmonic radar (already used to track bees) which involves fitting trapped hornets with a passive responder didn't work well in forested or urban environments and has signal strength limitations. Recently, radio telemetry using an active radio tag has proved a success, but isn't widely available. It still requires hornets that have been netted and cold-anaesthetised to be fitted with the transponder so they can be followed.

SEEK AND DESTROY

Other controls have been used in apiaries. Fipronil protein-baits, or sugary baits laced with alcohol, have been used for decades to try and reduce wasp predation, but it needs an element of knowledge and restraint as it can be dangerous to other species. The ingredient is often regulated or banned because of its risk in the environment and effects on people that are, at best, unpleasant. Potentially highly effective, in practice its success can rest on seasonal factors. There is already a worrying amount of fipronil in the environment that results from pet flea treatments. If you are an 'approved' user in New Zealand the commercial product 'Vespex' is an example of this type of approach, where the bait is collected and carried back to be fed to larvae, but it's likely that it would need to be reformulated to attract *V. velutina* or that different pre-feeding regimes might be helpful.

There are also physical barriers used in apiaries, (for sale or home-made) that exploit the size of hornets. In parts of Europe hive 'muzzles' have been tried and these seem partly successful. Essentially, a landing and take-off zone at the front of the hive is guarded by a wire cover that bees can fly through but hornets cannot. A rather more effective and substantial solution is an 'electric harp', in which wires separated by just less than a hornet wing span (18-20mm) carry an electric current produced by a solar panel. Bees fly through the harp easily but hornets contact both wires, shorting the current which kills them. A pre-commercial version, the 'Velzapper', has proved to be highly selective, more than 90% of its 'catch' being *velutina*, but it remains to be shown that enough hornets can be captured by the tool to lower predation to a sustainable level.

DESTINED FOR CO-HABITATION

All of these 'solutions' are really just tinkering at the edge of the problem, as they aren't useful for hundreds or even thousands of hives deployed as mobile pollination units, circumstances quite different to the small, static, suburban European apiaries they have been trialled in. If *velutina* becomes established in New Zealand, and to me both the initial lukewarm response and the prevailing disunity in the apiculture community suggest it is quite probable, we'll need to put our thinking caps on. The problem is not going to go away even if this particular incursion does, humans and hornets are destined to inhabit the same planet for quite a while.

Dave Black is a commercial-beekeeper-turned-hobbyist, now retired. He is a regular science writer providing commentary on "what the books don't tell you", via his Substack Beyond Bee Books, to which you can subscribe here.

See online version of this story for full list of references

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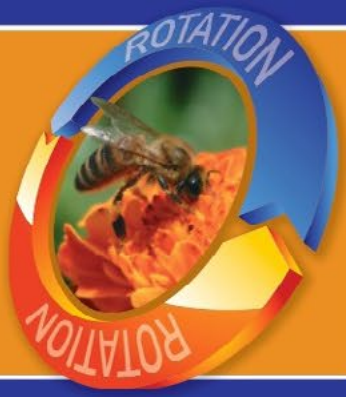

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The Comvita Takeover: Plan B

Spoiler alert: There is no Plan B. What shareholders saw was what they didn't get. The chance to exit Comvita shares at NZc 80 per share courtesy of the Florenz takeover bid has flown. But if there was a Plan B, what would it look like? And what fate awaits shareholders now that Comvita's future hangs in the balance? Bruce Roscoe comments.

BY BRUCE ROSCOE

More Comvita shares were voted in favour of the Florenz Ltd takeover proposal in November than against, but neither threshold of 50% of total shares in issue of 75% of total votes cast was met.

Image created by ChatGPT.

The percentages achieved were 43.1 (against: 31.9) and 53.7 (39.8). But this was not a lower hurdle general election, and Florenz had sought a mandate by broad consensus for its proposed ownership.

Through due diligence, the position of Mark Sadd, a former Comvita chief financial officer and now Florenz chief commercial officer, and through participation in the same industry, Florenz may know nearly as much about Comvita as there is to know. It knew enough to ready a war chest of about NZD115m — NZD56.4m to buy out shareholders for value about equal to their equity, and NZD59m to repay banks by 1 March.

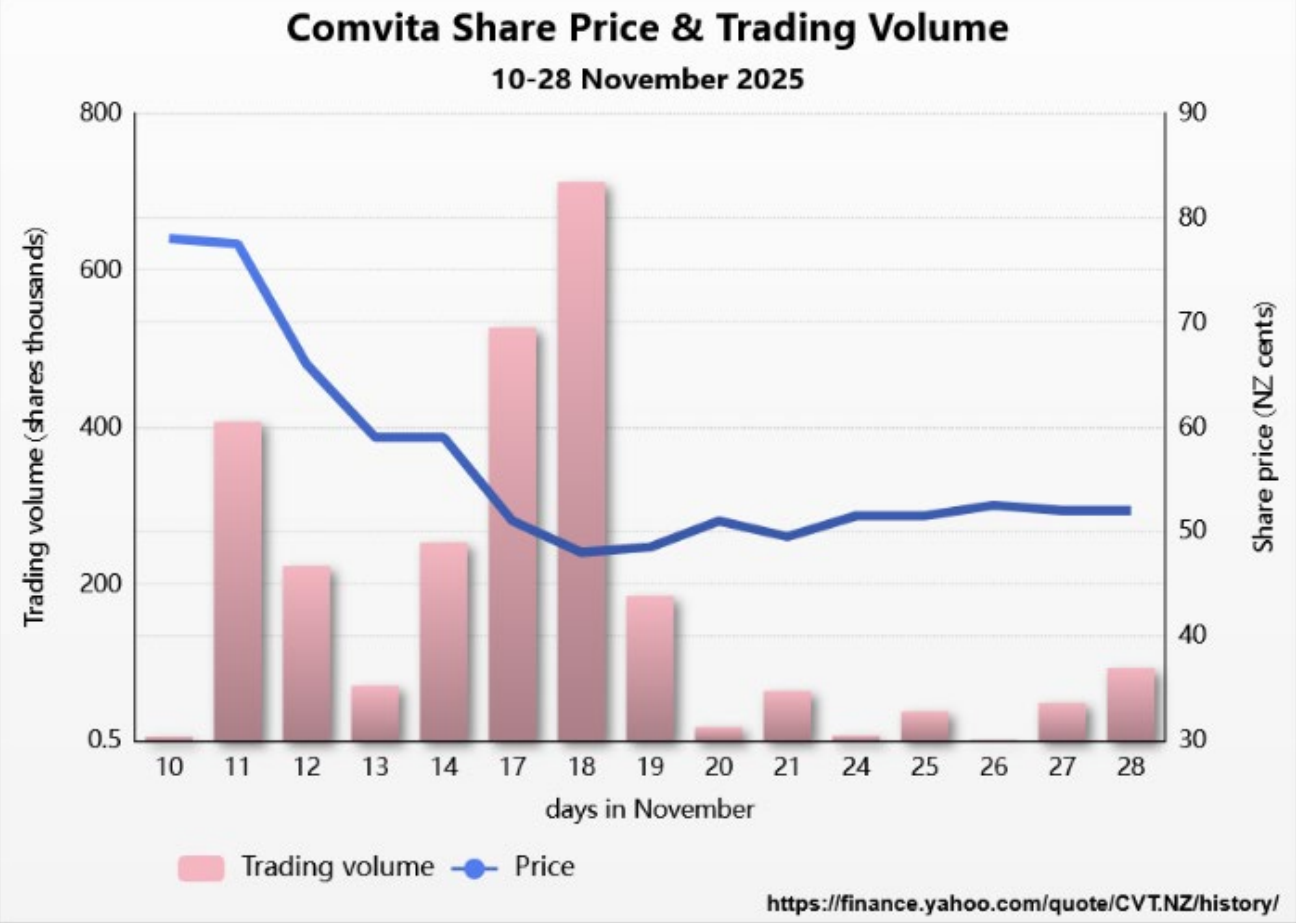
Florenz or other suitors could accumulate shares through NZX. Under the Takeovers Code Comvita is a "Code company", which means a company of size with a large shareholder base. After a suitor acquires 20% of a code company, it cannot further increase is holding without making a takeover offer.

Such an offer can be "full" (for all outstanding shares) or partial, and conditional upon reaching 50%. Control of management can be achieved at 51% ownership but a major decision, such as delisting from NZX, would require 75% ownership. As a company for whom doing laundry on the balcony of NZX would be anathema, Florenz can be expected to deploy its war chest in other battles. And in the event of a receivership, it can cherry-pick Comvita assets as it pleases.

SMART MONEY

Comvita posted updates on the takeover vote to NZX on 11, 12 and 13 November. Smart money read the first update (27.8% for; 20.2% against) as a probable failure of the bid, trading volume increased to 407,658 shares from 6,088 shares the day before, and the price fell 11.5% to NZc 69. The heavy-volume selling continued through 19 November, sinking the price to NZc 50. An orderly exit from this stock seems unlikely.

Receivership would entrap shareholders, as trading would be halted. Each share represented NZD1.14 in Comvita net debt at 30 June. Receivers will attempt to sell assets until each NZD1.14 is recovered. Problem is, each share is backed by only NZc 78c in net asset value.



BANKERS AS BEEKEEPERS

If Comvita directors' worst fears are realised, the company's bankers will take control of the business, sidelining management. They may even don beekeeping suits to survey what the company's balance sheet describes as "biological assets" — the beehives. They must take care not to upset the bees through inept handling, lest they be stung.

The bankers would operate the company through the receivers they appoint. At this late stage, creditors prevail over owners, and shareholders as owners lose their voice.

PINK SHEET PENNY STOCKS

Comvita shares now share traits with penny stocks on pink sheets, named after the colour of the paper on which the National Quotation Bureau of the US printed stock quotations after its establishment in 1913.

Today the pink sheets refer to an over-the-counter market for the unlisted securities of companies which do not meet stock exchange listing criteria. Comvita shares were first publicly traded in 2002 after quotation on the Unlisted Security Market of the NZSE (now New Zealand Exchange) in September 2002.

Fortunes are difficult to make but easy to lose on pink sheet stocks. They typically belong to small companies with profit records as uneven as the uncertainty of their futures. Many are priced at less than USD1, demonstrate wide price swings when traded, which may not be often, and show a disregard for laws of both finance and physics.

Trading in pink sheet stocks usually is the preserve of broker dealers. Individuals are discouraged from investing in them due to volatility and risk.

Bruce Roscoe is a Japan-resident researcher and former foreign correspondent and securities analyst.

John Bush – Passion and Identity in Beekeeping Until the End

John Bush was born into beekeeping in Marlborough and, for the recently deceased 94-year-old who pioneered beekeeping on New Zealand's largest farm, it was his passion and a huge part of his identity right to the end. Murray Bush reflects on his father's beekeeping life, from the supreme work-ethic of a boy raised in the depression, to building an iconic South Island honey-brand and mentoring the next generation of local beekeepers.

BY MURRAY BUSH

John Bush was born into a Marlborough beekeeping family and was still harvesting honey boxes into his seventies, and delivering the iconic J Bush & Sons brand he created to shops into his nineties.

My father was born Edward John Bush on 12 April 1931, but was known as John Bush all his life. He was born into the beekeeping world as his father Horace had started keeping bees in 1916.

Like all children of beekeepers, he would have started playing and working in the honey shed from the day he started walking. Fast-forward and Dad threw his last honey box at 76, and stopped delivering honey to the supermarkets every Friday aged 91.

At one stage, Dad thought about entering the forestry industry, but when he left school, he made two decisions that defined the rest of his life. One was to court and marry Joy, for an incredible 57 years before Mum passed away in 2011. The second decision being to start working for his father as a beekeeper.

For the next 50 years bees and honey became Mum and Dads' lifetime passion, their identity, and their avenue for helping others in the community. As a result Bush's honey was always known as 'Joy and John Bush, Beekeepers'.

They created lifelong friends from operating the shop from our honey shed. A five-minute trip to get a honey pot filled was often turned into a one-hour social catch up.

They loved loading up the car with honey and travelling together to build a new customer base in Nelson and other towns. Many of these shops, and descendants of previous owners, continue as customers 50 years later.

They opened up their honey shed annually for hundreds of school kids to have tours, showcasing live bees and tasting honey. Sadly these times have been lost, but Mum and Dad were never happier than seeing a smiling face from someone who had just had a spoonful of honey.

TAMING THE MIGHTY MOLESWORTH

Dad enjoyed helping new beekeepers develop skills and knowledge, and helping farmers understand how bees helped with clover pollination. He considered his greatest business

achievement was developing bees on Molesworth Station from 1958 to help the great Bill Chisholm establish clover as a stock food, but critically to stop soil erosion and weeds.

Bill Chisholm had read an article that bees could improve clover seed viability by more than 70%, and save money by eliminating annual reseeding. So began a synergy between bees and high-country environment management that continues today, in 2025.

In the early days the road to Molesworth was tough, with narrow windy roads, multiple river crossings with the risk of being stuck on every trip. Snow and heavy rain was a constant risk any week of the year.

For the first ten years Dad generally worked by himself, manually loading honey boxes after driving four hours each way to start and finish his bee work. All this in a Bedford truck with no power steering or heater.

The physical and mental fortitude required of beekeepers and other farm staff, working in this high-country environment back in the 1950s and 1960s, is almost impossible to comprehend in 2025, as we now race along in air-conditioned trucks towing forklifts.

My grandfather started delivering his honey to grocers around the top of the South Island in the 1930s, and Mum and Dad expanded this practice as they developed the Bush and Sons brand. They understood the concept of vertical integration and control from production to customer, long before management magazines made it standard practice.

EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

With five kids, a business and church commitments, Dad found he could not afford the time for National Beekeeper Association administration roles, but he loved being involved with the Canterbury Beekeepers Association and always kept up to speed on national beekeeping issues.

In 1984 he was a founding member of the Marlborough Beekeepers' Association and loved mentoring the new generation of beekeepers. A number of these inaugural members are still involved in Marlborough beekeeping and Dad had real pride seeing them develop over the years.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

All five of us kids worked in the bees or honey shed growing up, as a means of getting the all-important pocket money. I'm sure we probably got in the way more often than not, but Dad's real satisfaction came when two of his sons, Peter and myself, returned full-time to the honey business. Thus completing the third generation.

Dad officially renamed his business J Bush and Sons Ltd in 1977, without ever knowing if his kids would like beekeeping. So having two kids involved, was something he cherished.

He only stopped coming to the honey shed for morning smoko with "the boys" when he went into the rest home aged 92.

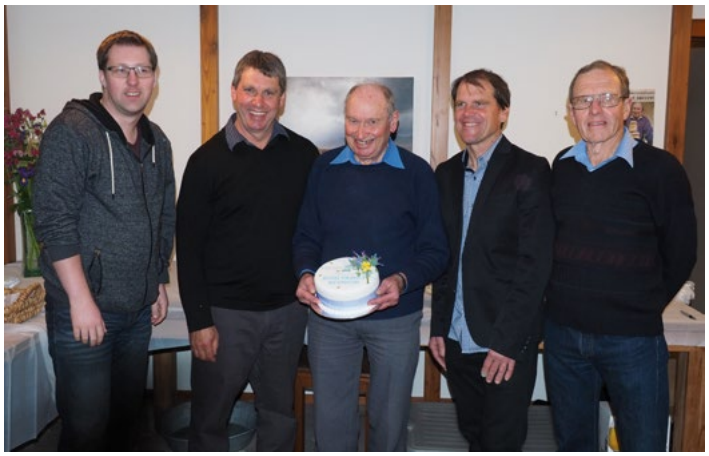
Molesworth station view, from near the Red Gate Hut, showing clover and blue borage in flower – a forage source which John Bush's bees have turned into an iconic honey brand for more than five decades and continues to this day, beyond his recent passing.

ADVENTURE SEEKER

Dad has been an adventurer all his life. He loved taking the family on caravan holidays around every corner of New Zealand, and there are very few roads we have not explored.

As a 16-year-old he biked from Blenheim to Christchurch return on gravel roads and single speed bike. Why? He and his mate just felt like doing something different.

Dad always treated beekeeping as a continuous adventure. He loved the landscapes, fresh air, and dealing with the farmers and shop keepers. While continually trying to shield the family from his stress, he navigated the weather, honey prices, markets, and bee health. He hated American foulbrood and demanded vigilance when inspecting hives, and was quick with a match if required. Not much has changed in 2025.



In 2016 J Bush & Sons celebrated 100 years of the family beekeeping enterprise in Marlborough. Long term employees, from left to right, Michael Jamie, Murray Bush, the late John Bush, Peter Bush and Don Freeth, the latter putting in 45 years of work for the business.

VARROA – A GAME CHANGER

It broke Dad's heart when varroa arrived in the country, as he knew his cherished bees were going to suffer. Dad and the rest of us were working the bees from the Red Gate Hut in the back of Molesworth the day we heard about varroa in Auckland. Dad declared then and there he would retire the day varroa arrived in Marlborough, as he didn't want his memories tainted with dying bees.

Dad lived his life with a purpose to serve others in all aspects of his life. He loved to communicate, and was never shy to start conversations with complete strangers, with bees and family generally top of the topic list. Contacts he made on Apimondia trips from all around the world stayed with him long after retiring.

In the last 18 months of Dad's life, he was excited to get to know the new owners of J. Bush and Sons, Matt and Sarah Goldsworthy, and Jordon Watson and Jenna Marfell. Visiting their new honey shed in Nelson, and seeing his precious honey still being sold in the supermarket, gave him immense pleasure.

Even aged 93, Dad told me he had to quietly talk to a customer in Pak n' Save who had picked up another brand of honey, other than Bush's. A true passion never fades away.

It is impossible to really give Dad's life the full justice it deserves in one article, but he strove to give his absolute best to his faith, his family, his community, and his business. Over a span of 94 and a half years, Dad achieved this goal in spades – and more.

Edward John Bush, 12 April 1931 – 11 November 2025.

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Unity: The Hard Work Behind the Constitution

Building on from columns analysing the failings of existing beekeeping and honey industry governance (*The Future of Beekeeping Representation: Let's Talk About It*) and what he sees as an ideal governance structure for the future (*Let's Move the Conversation Forward*), Darren Bainbridge now addresses the term thrown forward by many as an essential building block: *"unity"*.

BY DARREN BAINBRIDGE

Over the last couple of articles, I have written about structures, boards, representation, and how a unified industry body could function. We have kicked around models like "one roof, two boards," debated who should be at the table, and pointed out where previous attempts fell short.

Darren Bainbridge – "If this joint constitution process collapses, it won't be because the wording of Clause 7.3(b) was impossible. It will be because we carried the same old habits and rivalries into a process that requires a different mindset."

Now Apiculture New Zealand (ApiNZ) and New Zealand Beekeeping Inc (NZBI) are sitting down together to draft a constitution they can both stand behind.

This is a big step.

But if we are honest, the real challenge isn't just what goes into that constitution. It is how we behave around it as an industry and what we expect from the structure that comes out the other side. Even once the constitution is finalised and a new board is elected, the real machinery of the industry will still sit outside of this new board and peak body organisation.

Bee health and biosecurity will still be managed by the New Zealand Bee Health & Biosecurity Trust. Marketing, honey quality assurance, and international brand protection will still live with the UMF Honey Association (UMFHA). Research, extension, and industry support will remain scattered across whoever has the resources to do the work.

This means the job of the new board will not be simply to "lead". **Its first and foremost task will be to work with both the Trust and UMFHA on how we can eventually bring all three organisations together as one.**

The constitution doesn't create unity. It simply gives us a place to start building it.

RECOGNISING THE UNITY WE ALREADY HAVE

When people talk about unity, they often talk as though we are trying to bolt together a bunch of unrelated parts. But that's not actually true.

We already share a deep, practical unity:

- We all rely on honey bees.
- We all depend on the sale of bee related products and services such as: honey, pollination, queens, nucs, and more.
- We all trade on New Zealand's reputation in overseas markets.
- We are all exposed to the same biosecurity risks and the same economic roller coaster.

Whether you run 200 hives or 20,000, are a packer, an exporter, or a contract beekeeper, we are all tied into the same system.

Therefore, the goal of a new constitution isn't to create unity out of nothing. **It is to recognise and protect the unity that already exists**, and stop smashing it to pieces every time a disagreement comes along.

This is the first mental shift the industry needs. We are not here to carve up territory, we are here to put a framework around the shared reality we already live in.

THE BIGGEST RISK IS US, NOT A NEW CONSTITUTION

If this joint constitution process collapses, it won't be because the wording of Clause 7.3(b) was impossible. It will be because we carried the same old habits and rivalries into a process that requires a different mindset.

We have all seen it before:

- Old grudges dressed up as "principle".
- "We are right, they are wrong" thinking.
- People fighting for status or position.
- The belief that unity must look exactly like my version, or not at all.

If we are serious about unity, we have to accept something uncomfortable: We don't always need to get our own way.

That doesn't mean we stop asking questions or stop pushing for better outcomes. It simply means we stop treating unity as a win-lose contest. The aim here isn't victory for one group, it is survival and progress for the whole industry.

THE REAL WORK BEGINS AFTER THE SIGNING

If the industry treats the constitution as the finish line, we have already lost because a constitution gives us a shared room, not a finished house.

Once the constitution is adopted, the new board won't suddenly hold all the power. It will have no administrative team, no policy unit, and no operational capacity of its own. The heavy lifting will still be done by the NZ Bee Health & Biosecurity Trust, UMFHA, and the smaller groups carrying the load today.

That means **unity will depend entirely on how well we collaborate after the ink dries**.

Real unity will emerge only when bee health, market access and honey quality, and national representation begin operating with aligned purpose and shared accountability.

That is long-term work, uncomfortable work, and work a constitution alone cannot do.

So, while the board begins that process, the wider industry has its own role to play and the way we show up over the next few months will decide whether the new structure succeeds or collapses under the weight of old habits.

HOW WE SUPPORT UNITY FROM HERE

If we want to back the new board and give the new constitution a real chance of succeeding, we will need to lean into these four simple but demanding principles.

- **We recognise and value the unity that already exists:** For all our disagreements, the truth is we already share the

same bees, the same markets, the same risks, and the same reputation. Unity isn't something the board invents; it's something the industry recognises and protects. Supporting unity means starting from what connects us, not what divides us.

- **We choose humility, patience, and the willingness to put up with each other:** Not because everyone is easy to deal with, but because unity requires tolerating differences. We are not all going to think alike, work alike, or communicate alike, but we can choose to stay in the conversation rather than storming off the moment someone challenges us. Humility doesn't mean you stop caring; it means you stop assuming you are the only one who cares.
- **We accept that we won't always get our own way:** A structure that perfectly suits one group will fail the rest. Backing unity means accepting compromise: no group gets everything, but everyone gets enough to move forward. Progress matters more than personal victory.
- **We recognise that our well-being is tied to each other's well-being:** When one part of the industry succeeds, we all rise with it. Stronger export markets lift demand for producers. Better honey quality assurance strengthens every brand on the shelf. Effective biosecurity protects every hive in the country. And when beekeepers, packers, marketers, and service providers each play their part well the whole industry becomes more resilient, more respected, and more profitable. Supporting unity means recognising that success is not a zero-sum game, it is a shared gain. What's good for one sector ultimately strengthens us all.

These four values are simple to say and hard to practice, however they are the conditions unity cannot exist without. If we embrace them, the new constitution becomes the first genuine foundation we have had in years. If we ignore them, no structure will save us. it becomes just another document buried under the weight of old habits.

IF WE TREAT THIS AS THE BEGINNING, WE MIGHT FINALLY GET SOMEWHERE

The constitution will be important. But it will not magically fix the industry, and it will not instantly unify us. What it *can* do, if we let it, is give us a platform to finally bring the three major parts of the sector into alignment: bee health, market access, and industry representation.

That work will take time. It will take honesty. It will take humility. It will also take a kind of unity we have rarely shown. However, if we treat this moment as the beginning, not the end, then for the first time in a long time we might actually be able to build the industry we keep saying we want.

Darren Bainbridge is the founder and director of MyApiary, management software for beekeeping and honey businesses that spans New Zealand, Australia and North America. He has been at the helm of the business since 2016 and has kept a small amount of beehives since 2012.

Unity, easily said, but how any new beekeeping group is led and followed will be the real test.

John Berry on: Norway's Bountiful Beehives

It's been a bumper honey season for John Berry's son Chris in his now-home of Norway as the long daylight hours, combined with some hot, dry weather have seen a range of nectars flowing. The Hawke's Bay beekeeper reports on his recent travels to 61 degrees north where some late-summer work awaited.

BY JOHN BERRY

I arrived in Norway just-in-time to extract this year's crop of heather honey. At around 12kg/hive, it was a bit disappointing, mainly because the area where the hives were was a bit dry. However, the heather was just the icing on top of a large cake in a year that has been truly amazing, one of those really rare seasons where all the stars align and the weather actually cooperates. Despite the worst swarming season (mostly controlled) he has ever seen, my son's 24 hives averaged over 100kg/hive.

Like in New Zealand though, just because one area does well doesn't mean other parts of the country will follow, and some beekeepers I met said it was one of the worst seasons. Some things don't change no matter how far you go.

The vast majority of honey sold in Norway is granulated and, rather than by variety, names tend to go by 'spring', 'summer' and 'autumn'. Where my son lives, near Lillehammer in the country's southern interior, 'spring' honey is predominantly dandelion. In summer, wild raspberry is the main crop, followed by clover and fireweed which he called 'late summer'. Heather is the autumn honey.

The topic de jour – 'drying' honey. Heather honey has a naturally high moisture content (and Codex rules recognise this). Two fans, two industrial dehumidifiers and four days took out five percent.

Chris's experience with heather honey is that it is always high in moisture and ferments very easily. Therefore, he has found it is very important not only to dry it, but to dry it quickly before any fermentation can occur in the combs (Editor's note – the topic of 'drying' honey was detailed last month in *Friendly Fire from an Apimondia Broadside*). Once fermentation is started, it is hard to stop. Regulations do allow for heather honey to be higher in moisture than any other honey (up to 23% as opposed to 20% for other honey varieties) and I just don't understand this. In my experience it needs to be at a low moisture level to stop fermentation and even when dried very carefully it can still get a bit fizzy if stored somewhere warm over time.

Chris's hand-operated pricker. Effective, but hard work.

This year Chris experimented with putting four hives up at the mountain farm (most farms in the area have a 'valley' farm and a 'mountain' farm). It is a predominantly forested area, but with a lot of wild raspberry which is quite dominant for several years after logging. He was told they wouldn't do any good and initially this did seem to be true. Then, all of a sudden, things turned around and they ended up averaging 150kg.

The season is short, but very intense with almost continuous daylight and plants that have a very short window to get

pollinated and they really go all out to attract the pollinators.

I have never stayed so late in the autumn before and, despite it being reasonably warm, everything, including the bees, seem to realise that winter is coming and they just shut down.

LANDING HOME

Next thing I know I am back home and my hives are cranking up. I actually found the change of seasons more disconcerting than the jetlag. Fortunately, I got away with leaving them alone for the best part of a month. One of the things I did before I left was to give them all some fondant. I have never fed this before and I have to say I was quite impressed how the bees consumed all of it.

THE RAT AND THE TOILET BRUSH

The recent death of ex-Prime Minister Jim Bolger reminded me of a conference many years ago when his son Paul Bolger was taking part in a debate to entertain the crowds. I don't remember what the debate was about, but I do remember my brother referring to Dr Mark Goodwin as Harry Potter's younger brother and then later Paul Bolger looking out into the audience and saying, "is that John Berry out there or a rat looking through a toilet brush". He told me later that his father had wanted to use this line many times in Parliament, but had been too much of a gentleman to do so.

John Berry is a retired commercial beekeeper from the Hawke's Bay, having obtained his first hive in 1966, before working for family business Arataki Honey and then as owner of Berry Bees. He now keeps "20-something" hives.

Chris marking a queen – something I never do.

Mercury Rising

Our time in the orchards has come to an end. Consummation of the kiwifruit means our tempo has slowed. Beekeeping activities are winding down as the temperature rises, and yeah baby, things are heating up.

The red, the gold, and the green are set on the vines, and fields of watermelons are patrolled by armed guards. Pollination was a blast, and a piece of cake, walked through this time by my older brother.

A veteran beekeeper, he's seen a lot over the years. From bust to boom, he's been there. Through tormentuous weather events and vandalism, family flare ups and theft, he's still here. He gets to work with me now. He got to see me almost fall off the deck of the truck, twice in one night. To learn that important lesson without hurting myself, well, someone must be looking out for me.

Unfortunately, and not for the first time, my brother got to see our bees poisoned while in the kiwifruit.

Everybody knows, do not spray while our bees are in the orchard, and everybody talks about saving the bees, but somebody is accountable for spraying the different varieties within the orchard whilst the bees are employed. Sweeping away the dead field bees can't hide it. Sprays don't even have to be toxic, it's the particles, like surfactants, that block the bee's spiracles. Neighbouring facilities compound the problem. Is it just collateral damage or should there be better liaison between managers? Am I hot around the collar or is it just the weather?

The humidity in the orchards was killer throughout that last task of installing mite control in the hives, but after some big days and nights, our bees are far from home. Pollination units turned free-flow honey gatherers. In general, the hives leaving the orchards were quite light in stores, the constant November rain slowing nectar flows.

Mother nature will do as she pleases.

Chasing the sun, our honey sites are micro-climates. Set between Cape Runaway and Waikerimoana, we lay down mileage pursuing the elusive UMF. Hopeful for high counts, but never guaranteed. Honey is money, but pollination is our bread and butter.

What does a beekeeper do while waiting for the sweet stuff to settle in?

From kiwifruit orchards to watermelon fields, there's some hard working beehives out there.

Turns out we have a shed-load of gear to sort out, followed by a few fishing trips. Then, in the coming weeks, thousands of honey boxes will be in transit. Preparations are underway in the extracting room, a far cry from last year – the bro and I had already pumped out drums of honey at this time. Slowly it's sinking in, the only constant in this business is change.

For better, or worse, changes keep you on your toes. Having no beehives around to work is a bit different, as getting personal with a colony is really the highlight of the job. Pre-emptively, I smuggled a hive home, so I can work bees when I'm not working bees…

They're a joy to watch at least, with a cuppa or a cold one on the back porch. Beneficial to my state of mind and my environment, they change the focus, an everyday reminder to just observe peacefully.

November saw Aimz and her brother applying varroa treatments to hives before they exited the kiwifruit orchards.

Changes have always been a given, and questions follow. Will the honey flood in this year? Will we survive the season with little to no mite damage? Will our new worker work out? What does the future hold?

Chill, only Mother Nature knows, I'm just a beekeeper.

Relax, into the buzz of summer,

Aimz

Aimz is a second-generation commercial beekeeper in the Bay of Plenty who took up the hive tool fulltime at the end of the 2024 honey season. Formerly a stay-at-home mum to four kids, she has now found her footing in the family business.

The bees were packing away the broom pollen in November in the Bay of Plenty, once they escaped the kiwifruit orchards.

Apiarist's Advocate is brought to you by Patrick & Laura Dawkins, Marlborough beekeepers.
Apiarist's Advocate Ltd.
NZBN: 9429051156954
ISSN: 3021-4742
www.apiaristsadvocate.com
www.facebook.com/apiadvocate
www.instagram.com/apiarists_advocate

Editorial

Editor: Patrick Dawkins

To make comment or send press releases please email **editor@apiadvocate.co.nz** or phone **Patrick, 027 383 7278.**

Creative

Design: Ashleigh Ryan

Advertising

For more information or to make a booking, email **advertising@apiadvocate.co.nz** or phone **Patrick 027 383 7278** or **Laura 021 130 7446**.

Booking deadline is the second to last Friday of the month prior to publication and artwork must be supplied by the final Friday of the month.

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