

Caesar: What say'st thou to me now? Speak once again.

Soothsayer: Beware the ides of March.

--- Bill Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar"

I think there is a good chance the Soothsayer in "Julius Caesar" was a Master Beekeeper. He certainly had great advice for beekeepers in the North Carolina Piedmont.

"Ides" is Latin for "half division"; the "Ides of March" is the middle of the month, March 15. This was when Caesar met his maker, and it is when our bees can easily starve to death if we don't keep a sharp eye on their honey stores.

The reason for this is that a well-behaved queen will resume laying sometime in January. Red maple trees explode with blooms during late January and February, and our bees work them aggressively when the weather warms up enough for them to fly. This influx of pollen and nectar stimulates brood-rearing even further. The queen and workers turn pollen and nectar into baby bees as quickly as the foragers bring it in, leaving little or nothing in the cupboard as a reserve. By the first part of March, it isn't uncommon to find hives that have grown so much that they swarm.

Then the maple trees stop blooming. A few plants, like henbit, come in to take up a little of the load, but in relation to the now-booming hive population, there is a severe food shortage. The gravy train doesn't take off again until the massive April nectar flow, dominated by tulip poplar. The result can be starvation of the colony during the interim period, and it can happen quickly. In fact I had this happen to an extremely strong colony this past spring in the manner I've described. Other colonies had enough reserves, so I didn't pay close attention to every single one. If I had noticed the problem, I would have fed the

hive as much sugar syrup as it would take and would have averted tragedy. They say we learn from our mistakes, not our successes, and that's certainly true for me! The trick is to not repeat those mistakes.

The figure at the bottom of the article illustrates pollen count data interpolated to create an estimated average profile for Hillsborough, NC. The maple bloom is quite obvious in February, followed by a sharp drop in flowering activity. Then a few weeks later there is a tremendous increase which lasts until late spring. Note the small bump from late August to early October; this coincides with the fall nectar flow from goldenrod and asters that hopefully will sustain our bees over the winter.

The lesson here is to maintain vigilance with respect to your bees' stores even as spring appears to be underway. It is incredibly disappointing to successfully bring a strong, healthy hive through winter only to have it die moments before spring truly arrives.

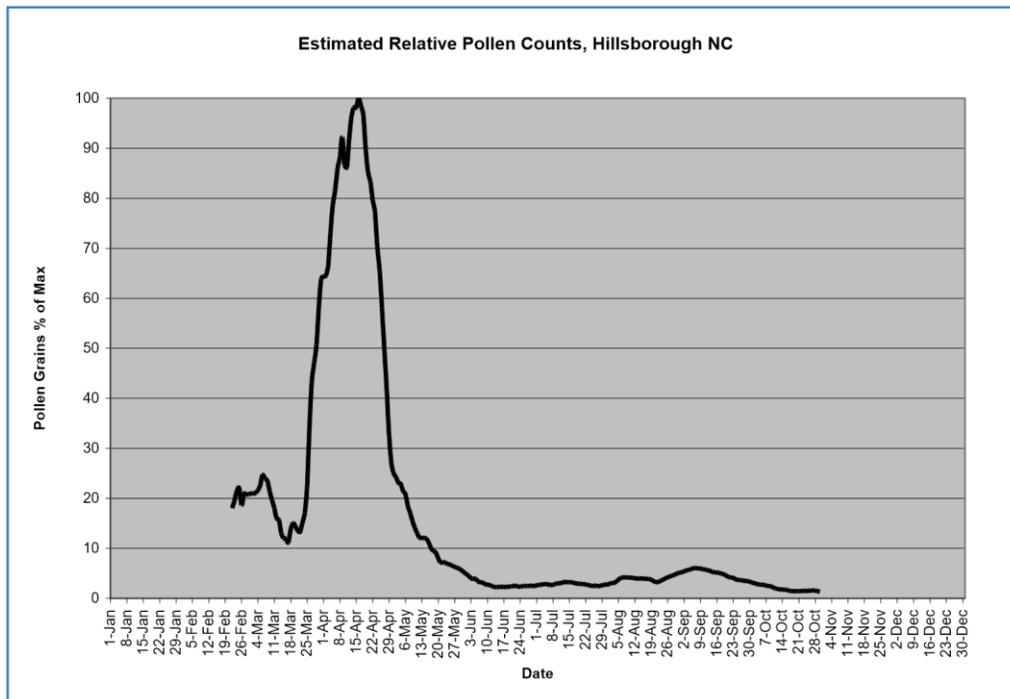
A few quick notes

1. The NC State Beekeepers Association's Spring Meeting is in Wilmington this year, Wednesday, March 6th to Saturday, March 8th. This year's conference has been expanded an extra day to hold all of the workshops and presentations that will be offered. Of particular interest for those seeking to advance in the Master Beekeeper Program is a short course taught by NCSU's Dr. John Ambrose, who has recently reassumed overall responsibility for the program. Dr. Ambrose started the program in 1982, modeling it after the one at his alma mater, Cornell. The short course requires an additional fee. Full information can be found at ncbeekeepers.org.

2. For folks a little farther south, the South Carolina State Beekeepers Association Spring Meeting is a one-day event, to be held in Columbia, SC on Saturday, March 1st. Information is at scstatebeekeepers.org.
3. Why does this article talk about March instead of February? There are two reasons:
 - a. A good beekeeper stays ahead of his bees. Planning for March should happen in February, at the very latest.

Similarly, I want to provide “news you can use”, not “news you could have used if you’d known about it in time.”

- b. I hate February. The only thing good about it is that it is short. With respect to bee management, it isn’t much different than January. So for tips on February bee management, see my [January article](#).



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