One CVEA Employee is All A Buzz

Up close view of a honeybee on a dandelion. © Oleksiy Ilyashenko-Fotolia.com

According to Dale Orvedahl, Project Engineer for CVEA, being a beekeeper means that a person takes the responsibility of care and feeding of honeybees. "It is the beekeeper's responsibility to provide an environment for his bees that will ensure they can sustain themselves."

Dale is a beekeeper with two hives, or colonies, kept in CVEA's Copper Basin District. A hive is best defined by the group of bees that take orders from a single queen bee. He started in April with two packages of Western Carniolan honeybees containing roughly 15,000 bees each. He now has close to 40,000 in each hive, and at maturity his hives will likely have 60-80,000 honeybees.

Beekeeping is not new to Dale, however. He started his first hives three years earlier after visiting a friend who had just been given one. Dale quickly accumulated enough equipment for five beehives. Dale and his wife, Cindy, actually maintained 40 hives in four different locations in Utah in 2012, before coming to work for CVEA in Valdez.

Dale was cautioned to keep his Alaskan beekeeping adventure to a smaller scale as beekeeping in Alaska is much different than keeping bees in the Lower 48. Some of these differences are positive and some are not.

The human population density is much less here which reduces the concern of unwanted interaction. The use of herbicides and pesticides is also much less in Alaska making honeybees less susceptible to a large number of diseases that are prevalent in the Lower 48. The weather, however, plays a huge part in the success of beekeeping here just like it does anywhere else. In Alaska, the long harsh winters prevent most beekeepers from keeping their hives over the winter which means starting from scratch with new bees every spring, getting them off to a much slower start with a substantially shorter season. The often cold, rainy Alaskan summers can also slow progress.

The most important thing a beekeeper needs to do is locate the bees in a spot that has good access to flowers throughout the entire season. Bees won't leave their hive in the rain, so a spot with dry weather is also important. A hive should be inspected every couple weeks to make sure the queen is laying eggs and the hive is disease free.

An inspection entails opening the hive, taking out each section, looking for new eggs, and making sure the queen is alive and well. The photos on the right show Dale performing an inspection of his hives.

When asked why he keeps bees, Dale said, "honeybees are incredibly fascinating creatures. I enjoy watching them work and I enjoy having the responsibility to provide them what they need to be healthy and sustain them. Of course fresh honey is a pretty good reason to keep honeybees as well!"

Each year Dale collects honey from his bees. In 2011, Dale collected roughly 300 pounds of honey from about eight hives. Most of it went to family and friends, but he also had contracts with a health food store and a garden center.

His goal at that time was to make beekeeping into a small business. With his smaller scale beekeeping venture in Alaska,

Dale believes he will eventually be able to get enough honey for personal use and to give as gifts.

For those wondering if beekeeping is for you, the first thing you should consider is your ability and/or willingness to be surrounded by thousands of bees.

Beekeeping is not dangerous unless you are allergic to honeybee stings, but one must be prepared to have them swarming around you. Most of the time, honeybees and humans coexist without even noticing each other, but each hive has bees dedicated to protecting it, so there are things to remember that can keep you out of trouble; like always using caution and wearing protective gear.

If someone wants bees in Alaska, they will have to have them shipped here in the spring from the Lower 48, most likely from the west coast; they are put in screened cages and flown to Alaska. Dale's advice is to start slow, with a couple of hives, do plenty of research and keep good records of what works for your bees and what doesn't. Not every tactic works in every location, so there is a lot of trial and error.

Dale's hives are a good example of that this year. His hives got off to a slow start due to the cold, wet April and May in Valdez. He chose to move the bees to the Copper Basin in May where the weather was much better.

A recent hive inspection revealed that the bees are doing better, but not as well as he hoped. He believes they are doing well enough to ensure that next year's bees get off to a much better start.

According to Dale, "you have to have perseverance to be a successful beekeeper." His goal for this first year is to get two complete hives with drawn out comb since he started with new, unused equipment. He thinks he will be successful in that regard and his fellow coworkers at CVEA wish him the best of luck.

Dale shares a few little known facts about Honeybees:

- Each healthy hive has only one queen. She leaves the hive only once to mate with male bees. After mating, the queen returns to the hive to lay up to 1,500 eggs a day for up to five years, without ever seeing the light of day again.
- All the work in the hive is done by females; they clean empty cells so the queen can lay another egg, feed larvae, tend to the queen, clear the hive of dead bees, and forage for pollen and nectar.
- A single worker honeybee may make only 1/12 teaspoon of honey in her lifetime.
- Honeybees must visit up to two million flowers to make a pound of honey.
- Male bees serve no purpose other than to mate with virgin queens. In the fall, the female worker bees will kick all the male bees outside of the hive where they die.
- Honeybees will forage an area about three miles in radius from their hive.
- Only the female worker honeybees can sting and after it does, it will die. ■

Top Left, Dale Orvedahl's two honeybee hives located on property in Copper Center
Top Right, Dale inspecting his hives; looking for new eggs and locating the Queen
Above Left, Dale calming the bees before he inspects the hive
Above Right, can you find the Queen? She is typically surrounded; she looks different so she can be easily found.

Photos by Sharon Crisp