

FAUNA

FERAL BEES AND HOW WE COPEd WITH THEM

Carole Sutton

OUR one-hectare property, in the foothills of the Darling Range, provides part of a corridor from the suburbs to the hills for birds and wildlife. Four years ago my husband made a number of bird nesting boxes and placed them in our trees. Since then, we have watched with delight many families of Maned Duck and Port Lincoln parrot take up residence and rear their young.

This year we also had some unwanted visitors. Feral bees. They were first seen on a neighbour's property, where they had taken over an owl's vacant nesting box. At first we were pleased to see them. After the shortage of bees the previous year, we looked forward to a better pollination program.

Then, a second swarm moved into one of our duck boxes. By the time they took over their third box we were becoming concerned, and decided it was time to do some culling. But how do you get rid of a box full of stinging creatures? It was summer and the land was tinder dry; fire was out of the question. Leaving the neighbouring owl's box alone, we experimented on the second box. It was lower down, in one of our trees, and more accessible. We tried popping mothballs in the hole. A week later the bees were as busy as ever, and taking no notice of our efforts.

Another swarm had taken over a fourth box. Fortunately it was out of the breeding season. In the hope of preventing more arrivals, we took the ladder around to the remaining empty boxes, brought down any needing repair, and nailed a cover over the openings of the others.

Next we tried camphor blocks in number two box. Again, to no avail. By now we were having to keep tight control of our grandkids, and dogs, one of which was allergic to bee stings, as a fifth colony of bees finding no open houses, settled into a huge mass on a low shrub. They stayed there for two weeks before moving off.

We tried ringing around to find a willing bee-keeper to come and collect them. But nobody wanted to know about feral bees. The Internet had masses of information on bees, but nothing on how to dispose of them. Our enquiries eventually brought us to a commercial maker of bird-nesting boxes, and how he dealt with the problem.

He used Mortein Moth and Insect Strips. They were readily available from the local store or supermarket. There is no mention of bees on the instructions, of course, but insert one whole strip into the box after dark. For the necessary potency you can use a strip only once. We tried it on box number two, and within three days the nest was clear of feral bees.

The remaining two boxes were more difficult, both were much higher in the trees and needed an extension ladder to reach them. We tried the parrot box first. It had



Swarm on nest box



Honeycombs inside nest box

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a hollow log on the front of it, and navigation through the log, whilst standing on a wavering ladder, would be a tricky business. In fact it took several attempts, using a pair of long BBQ tongs, to get the strip through the log and into the box.

The last box was the one we dreaded. The bees had formed a mound on the outside of the entrance hole, and the strip had to be pushed through the swarm. In the dark, on a hot summer's night, with the grandkids gone and the dogs locked in the house, we ventured out, suitably covered up, to make our final assault. I held the ladder firm, whilst my husband, again, using tongs, inserted the strip in the centre of the mound, and pushed it in. We made a hasty get-away before any angry bees could home in on us.

We had been lucky, over the whole period we had got away with only two stings apiece.

A few days later we took the boxes down. The honeycombs were stacked like books on a shelf inside, and obviously quite inedible after their poison strip treatment. We cleaned the nest boxes and made them ready for the next season's ducks and parrots.

Our helpful advisor also told us how to use the strip as a preventative. For those who want to know: cut one cm square off the strip and pin it inside on the roof of the box. We haven't done this yet, and are still wary of the idea of possibly contaminating the baby birds' environment. But at least, now we know how to deal with future bees.

At the first sign of a takeover this year, we'll be up the ladder with our Mortein, Moth and Insect Strips.



Note that the Suttons attach a piece of natural hollow log to the front of their boxes. They say that it increases the attractiveness of the box to birds.