The Snelgrove Method: How I Prevent Swarming and Raise New Queens

by Brittney Fairfield

Every beekeeper at one point or another will inevitably have to deal with their bees swarming. There are lots of different methods by which beekeepers tackle the complex and innate urge honey bees have to swarm, but my favorite and most successful by far is the Snelgrove method.

L.E. Snelgrove was a beekeeper in the 1930s. He was in the Royal Entomological Society, president of the Somerset Beekeepers Association and president of the British Beekeepers Association. He wrote three books on beekeeping, but the one he's most known for is *Swarming - Its Prevention and Control*. The Snelgrove method utilizes a specialized board, aptly referred to as a Snelgrove board, to split the colony into a double brood box setup with the board in between.

Snelgrove's board was originally intended for swarm prevention (like the Demaree method), where the beekeeper would judge when the bees were about ready to swarm before performing the manipulation. However, there are many variations that would control swarming and techniques for raising new queens. There is no one specific "Snelgrove method", but instead a number of ways to use a Snelgrove board to manage swarming.

I have used the Snelgrove method both pre-emptively (before the bees have made swarm cells), and after the bees have started to raise new swarm queens. In both instances, the board is used to separate the queen and forager bees from the eggs, brood, and nurse bees in two different brood boxes, but within the same hive setup. Once the colony is split, one box sits above the others in a vertical arrangement, with the board between them. Snelgrove's original idea was to use his board to provide the queen with extra laying space while maintaining all the bees at full strength in the hive.

The Snelgrove board has three pairs of entrances; each pair having one entrance above and one below the board. The entrances are opened and closed in a sequence that results in newly flying bees being "bled" back down into the main productive hive. The timings of the entrance manipulations are critical when a beekeeper wishes to use the board to raise one or more new queens.

The board is also referred to as a 'double screen board' and can be purchased or built using plans you can find easily online. Here is what the board looks like:

Photos courtesy of Brittney Fairfield

I learned about the Snelgrove method in my second year of beekeeping from an experienced beekeeper and I've been using it ever since. I'm now entering into my eighth year of beekeeping and I use the Snelgrove method every spring to prevent swarming and to raise new queens. Okay, enough chit chat, here's how I do it!

I ensure the hive is nice and strong, and is gearing up to swarm soon. I do this by regularly inspecting the colonies in early spring. I typically run the Snelgrove boards starting in late May to early June when the first big honey flow is on.

First, I locate the queen and secure her in a clip, making sure she is safe and confined while I start to re-organize and manipulate the frames. In a deep box I will put frames of honey, nectar, pollen, and any open frames of comb I have. This ensures the queen has plenty of space to lay new eggs. Sometimes, depending on the number of brood frames, one frame of brood will end up in the bottom deep with the queen. That's okay, but ideally she will be jam-packed with frames of honey and an open frame to start laying.

This deep brood box will go right above the bottom board. Following this deep I will put on a queen excluder, followed by a honey super with drawn out frames of comb. Sometimes I will put on two honey supers depending on the size and strength of the colony. The idea is that the worker bees will need to make space for the queen to lay in the bottom deep and so they will move most of the honey up to the super - and yes, they actually do this when the bottom deep is packed with honey.

Next comes the Snelgrove board. The board has a total of six different doors, but only on three sides of the board. The side of the board without an entrance will face the front of the hive. After the Snelgrove board goes on, the second deep box is filled with all the frames of eggs, brood, and larvae and any swarm cells if the colony has already started to raise swarm queens.

I also make sure they have a few frames of honey and pollen for food. It should look something like this when you're done:

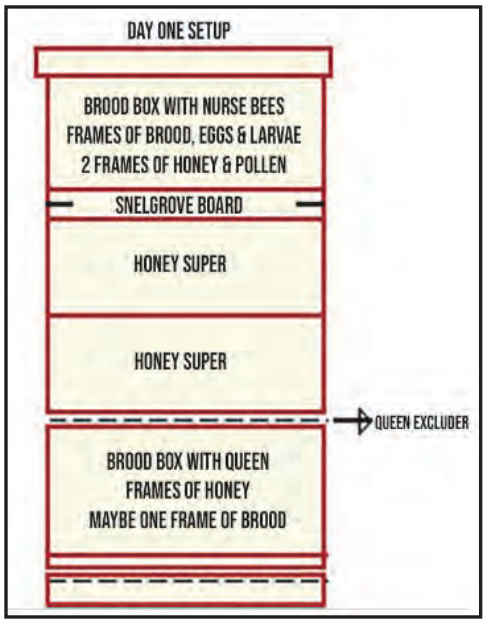

Photo courtesy of Brittney Fairfield

Now you are successfully running two hives on one setup! The top hive is queenless, but the nurse bees will remedy that soon enough. They will do so by either: continuing to feed and care for swarm cells if they are present, or by drawing out new queen cells. If the goal is to only prevent swarming, you can scrape queen cells, but I always raise new queens in the top box and this is how I've successfully grown my own apiary.

Photo courtesy of Brittney Fairfield

The timing and manipulation of the doors is imperative in order to simulate swarming, and if desired, to raise new queens in the top box.

-Day One: Open the top left entrance of the Snelgrove board and close all others. (The flying bees will return to the main entrance at the front of the hive).

-Day Five: Without opening up the hive, close the top left entrance and open the bottom left and top right.

-Day 10: Inspect the top deep box for any queen cells which may have been created. Remove all but the best ones required for developing a second colony (or for making up nucs). If no increase is sought, remove them all. At this stage, the bees have no viable eggs or larvae from which to make any further queen cells. Lastly, close the bottom left and top right entrances and open the bottom right and rear top entrances. At this stage the colony has artificially swarmed.

Photo courtesy of Brittney Fairfield

The initial return of the flying bees to the main entrance, followed by two manipulations that sent bees below the Snelgrove board to the bottom deep box has also allowed the colony to maintain its strength. If you don't wish to increase your apiary size and no queen cells were allowed to develop in the top box, you can remove the Snelgrove board and allow the remaining brood to emerge and then relocate the deep box below the honey super.

If you want to increase your apiary size and have allowed queen cells to fully develop, you will wait for a queen to emerge, successfully mate and start to lay eggs. This can take up to a month, sometimes a little longer depending on the weather so it's important to make sure the mother colony below the Snelgrove board doesn't run out of space. You may need to add another deep brood box below the super. Once the queen on top is laying eggs, the top box can be relocated to form a separate, new colony.

Photo courtesy of Brittney Fairfield

And that's it! This is how I have successfully used the Snelgrove method, year after year. It's important to try to time the use of the board to when the bees are naturally due to swarm, then the queens raised will generally be good ones. If the procedure is performed too early in the season, the emergency cells are more likely to result in poor queens.

What I like the most about using this method is that there aren't too many risks. You prevent swarming and you can also increase your apiary size. And, if raising a new queen wasn't successful for some reason, you can just re-combine after you have performed the door manipulations. In the end, what do you have to lose? I hope you'll try the Snelgrove method for yourself!