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News / Insight

Bee rustlers on the loose in Ontario

With honeybee populations under threat, beekeepers are stealing from beekeepers.

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PAUL HUNTER / TORONTO STAR

Bee-rustling victim Ian Critchell on his field of hives at his farm, north of Havelock, Ont.

By: **Paul Hunter** Feature reporter, Published on Sat Jul 13 2013

HAVELOCK, ONT.—Beekeepers, like the insects they breed, are creatures of routine, slaves to detail.

That's especially true of someone like Ian Critchell, as he raises queen bees as part of his honey-making operation here amidst the wildflowers on a bucolic 77-acre farm east of Peterborough.

There are key moments that occur like clockwork in the two-week process, such as when the queen, almost ready to emerge from her cell, is transferred to a small plastic cage and placed in the mating box, which is basically a mini-hive. Then, at another specific moment, the worker bees are introduced. Then comes the day for releasing the queen. And so on. It's exacting enough that when something is amiss, it is instantly obvious, as it was one Sunday last month.

That day, when Critchell opened the wooden mating boxes — where the worker bees are confined with their queen during a 48-hour bonding period — he was stunned. He understood immediately that someone had entered his property, walked up the hill past the house, past the barn, past the chickens and goats, to the large trucking containers where his mating boxes are stored. There the intruder would have taken the lid off one

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of the boxes, found the small plastic cage containing the queen, popped it open and taken the insect.

Video



Then the perpetrator must have moved on to the next box and repeated the theft.

Talk about a buzz kill. Two of his queens were gone.

Critchell was the victim of bee rustling.

As bee populations across the province are decimated by parasites, pesticides, mites, viruses and changing habitats, those who raise and nurture the important pollinators are also under threat.

It appears beekeepers are stealing from beekeepers.

“They knew exactly what they were doing,” says the 51-year-old Critchell of the robber that hit his farm. “It’s someone who has been around the business. To take queens, this is not a newbie at this.”

Critchell wanted to shrug it off, stoically hoping whoever pinched his bees, which sell for \$30 each, got all they needed and wouldn’t be back. Besides, he’d never be able to identify his bees even if he could find them.

“If someone has walked out with queens and they’re down the road, you can’t prove that they’re your queens. You can’t trace your bees. They’re not tagged like a cow,” he says.

But when he later noticed that six of his custom-made mating boxes, worth about \$100 each, were also stolen, he called the police. They’re unique enough to be identified.

Critchell is not alone. In May, in another incident reported to police, a thief in the Goderich area decided to take the honey and run, pilfering seven active beehives worth about \$2,100. That same month, Kawartha Lakes police were investigating the theft of eight hives worth about \$1,600 from a producer near Lindsay.

The buzz in beekeeping circles is that this spring there was also a robbery near Waterloo, another north of Peterborough and yet another in the Ottawa area, none of which made it into the media.

Last year, in Abbotsford, B.C., there was a reported theft of 100 hive frames that amounted to about 500,000 bees and 3,600 kilograms of honey, valued at \$100,000. In another large-scale theft, an Alberta beekeeper reported the loss of 150 hives — man-made wooden box structures containing frames of honeycomb cells and a bee colony — and about three million bees valued at about \$60,000.

In each case, it’s assumed the criminal with sticky fingers was an industry insider. Each hive can weigh about 80 kilograms and contain between 30,000 and 80,000 bees. It would take a very brave or very knowledgeable burglar to pull off the crime. As one apiarist wryly put it in the Farmers Forum newspaper, “Who would be stealing airplanes? It would have to be a pilot.” On one online chat room related to bee matters, a poster named Honey-4-All suggested “every bee guy needs to keep his eyes open, (and) shotgun loaded.”

The thefts and any hint of vigilantism, however, seem to run contrary to an unwritten code among beekeepers, who are generally calm — a job requirement — folks who love nature, even if it comes with a few stings along the way.

There are 3,100 beekeepers registered in Ontario, from hobbyists to commercial operators. And most honey producers with a large number of hives use more than one location so the bees have access to enough nectar. To guard them all is impossible. So they typically just trust one another.

Guy Anderson, a large honey producer based in Kincardine, has 1,300 colonies of bees spread over 56 farms. He’d heard of thefts this spring in the southwestern part of the province, including the Goderich heist, and says those actions are out of character for people in the industry.



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“I’ve just never met a beekeeper that would even ever consider doing something like that. This is some sort of slob beekeeper, like a slob hunter, someone who screws it up for everyone else,” he says. “I can’t see it being a hobbyist who is stealing. It sounds like it is a beekeeper — and not a very good beekeeper — that’s lost everything, then stealing seven hives or something like that to build back up.”

Clement Kent, a post-doctoral researcher at York University who studies honeybee genetics and behaviour, is also convinced that the masterminds behind the thefts must have intimate knowledge of bees and almost certainly want the hives for themselves.

“I’m saddened, not surprised,” says Kent. “They’d be stealing them to make up losses in their operation I would think. Everyone knows each other so it would be pretty hard to become the fence selling stolen bees.”

The thievery, most assume, is simple economics.

“If there’s a shortage of anything, there’s going to be more theft of it,” says beekeeper Len Hordyk, who has 30 hives in two locations in Listowel.

The winter and spring has not been kind to honeybees. While Paul Kozak, the provincial apiarist for Ontario, does not yet have numbers in for this year, he says that “anecdotally, I’ve heard concerns.”

Anderson doesn’t need provincial stats to know what happened. He lost 795 of his 1,300 hives, or about 61 per cent of his bees over winter. It will take him two years to build it back up.

Kozak says an average of 15 per cent mortality in the commercial sector is the threshold and a honey producer at or below that is considered to be “doing well.” Going into 2012, Kozak says, was one of the “best years on record for winter survival” with a colony mortality on average of about 13 per cent. The year before, there was a 43-per-cent mortality rate, the highest on record. That followed a year with 20 per cent mortality. The three years previous hovered around 33 per cent.

Hordyk lost 80 per cent of his bees from one of his yards this winter.

“This spring I was discouraged,” he says. “But I’ll probably give it another year. Farmers always say next year will be better.”

The plight of the bees has been garnering international headlines recently. Pesticides recently killed an estimated 50,000 bumblebees in an Oregon big-box-store parking lot, causing public outrage.

In the Star this month, [there was a report](#) of an apiarist in Elmwood, Ont., who lost an estimated 37 million bees, more than half of his stock, as a result of pesticides, he believes. The Canadian Honey Council says the estimated bee population in this country has dropped 35 per cent over the last three years.

There remain approximately 100,000 honeybee colonies in Ontario and honey production contributes \$25 million to the provincial economy.

This week, the Ontario government announced it is bringing together a group of experts — including beekeepers, scientists and farmers — as the Bee Health Working Group. It will provide recommendations on how to mitigate the potential risk to honeybees from exposure to neonicotinoid, the pesticide blamed for the deaths in Elmwood.

Critchell, meanwhile, is learning all too well that a pressing new threat is criminal behaviour. He says police don’t hold out much hope that they’ll make an arrest in the theft of his queens.

So Critchell is now doing what he would never imagined necessary when he bought this property — it was last used for a \$10-million marijuana-growing operation — just over a year ago.

He locks the gate at the entrance to his long narrow driveway when he takes his goods to the market in Port Perry every Saturday. He locks his storage containers as well. He's also set up his own sting operation, installing three security cameras.

One camera did pick up an unwanted visitor, who drove in but immediately departed when he got close enough to see Critchell's car, but it was only a partial image. And a neighbour reported recently seeing an intruder in the thick bushes that were grown at the front of his property to help hide the land's previous use.

The theft and new security is troubling to a soft-spoken, thoughtful man who simply wanted an idyllic life raising the bees he once had scattered over 25 farms while he lived in Whitby. Here he has consolidated his 110 colonies.

"I moved everything here to make life a little bit easier for the bees and myself. The habitat is very good for them," says Critchell, who has kept bees since he was a teenager in southern England. "It's like having a pet dog or cat. You kind of get used to having them close to you. For me to feel at home, it's good to have a couple of beehives close."

We value respectful and thoughtful discussion. Readers are encouraged to flag comments that fail to meet the standards outlined in our [Community Code of Conduct](#). For further information, including our legal guidelines, please see our full website [Terms and Conditions](#).

 **norah.gfon**

When used properly by growers, with Best Management Practices, pesticides cause no harm, and do not hurt bees. It is far more likely that bee-keepers themselves are harming bees, and not pesticides. If some anti-pesticide activists and bee-keepers were not so scientifically illiterate, they would know that scientific research shows that no harm will occur to bees with pest control products. <http://wp.me/p1jq40-2ba>
<http://wp.me/p1jq40-6H8> WILLIAM H. GATHERCOLE AND NORAH G <http://pesticidetruths.com/>
<http://wp.me/P1jq40-2rr>

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Comments (6)



Grooved Ware People 44 minutes ago

Definitely time for a 'Sting Operation' by the police. LOL

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Jimbocanuck 1 hour ago

Sorry for the double post especially the one starting with BEE
 Jimbocanuck

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RockyRCoon 1 hour ago

Look what I found: Last month, 50,000 dead bees were discovered littering a parking lot in Oregon. Then last week, a shocking 37 million bees were reported dead across a single farm in Ontario.

After years of research, scientists have finally figured out what's causing the massive bee die-offs all around the world, from China to the UK: It's a class of dangerous pesticides called neonics. And here's the wildest thing -- even though we know they're killing the bees, in most parts of the world, neonics are still in widespread use.

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 **Grooved Ware People** 41 minutes ago

Yeah, 'Better living (for stockholders) through chemistry', as the old DuPont Chemical commercial promised. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Better_Living_Through...
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Better_Living_Through_Chemistry)

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Jimbocanuck 2 hours ago

Last month we had a swarm of bees on my sons property so he called a well know exterminator that quoted \$255.00 to kill and remove the swarm. When I asked if it would be wiser to have a bee keeper collect the swarm I was told bee keepers would be interested because there is always the threat of an unknown bee swarm being infected with something that could be transmitted to a bee keeper own hives. I paid my money and they kill the swarm. This week I spoke a bee supply house and was told this is almost criminal and they or any bee keeper would gladly have collected the queen been and swarm for free and in doing so save a threatened natural resource. I believe legislation should be passed immediately to stop exterminators or privater individuals from killing of bees.

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Jimbocanuck 2 hours ago

Bee population is declining and a well know exterminating company destroyed a swarm of bee on my sons property after I asked them after I asked them if a bee keeper would come and remove the swarm and save the bees. Their response was to tell me that bee keepers would come if called because they wouldn't want to the bees because they might be infected with a disease. Paid the \$255.00 and they killed the big swarm of honey bees. Spoke to a bee supply house last week and was told they or any bee keeper would have been glad to pick up the swarm for free. There should be legislation stopping exterminators from killing off bee swarms or nests thus saving a much needed natural resource.

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