

POINT REYES LIGHT

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Kalle Cook collected a feral bee hive from inside a wall at the Marconi Center in Marshall. Cook said he likes working with bees because they are often misunderstood. Photo by Jacoba Charles.

Feral bees in business

by Jacoba Charles

Living bees cover the slab of honeycomb in Kalle Cook's bare hands like a thick layer of velvet. A golden drool of honey falls onto the grass as he fastens the comb onto a bar of wood, suspending it inside a wooden box. Then, armed with a smoker and a chisel, he fetches another humming comb from within the wall of a small cottage.

"I like working with the bees because they're often misunderstood," said Cook, who spent several hours removing the 19-comb hive from an outbuilding at the Marconi Center in Marshall last week. "It

forces me to be more bold and confident."

Cook, who lives in Inverness Park, is a beekeeper and hive removal expert. He describes his business as "removing your bee colony safely with love and minimal stress to bees."

Eventually Cook plans to use the same bees that he collects to produce wax and honey, as well as provide pollination services for local gardens and crops.

For the moment, though, his focus is on the removal services, and particularly "cutouts" from buildings such as the one he did at the Marconi Center.

"Most beekeepers are happy to grab

Fishermen face closed season

by Jacoba Charles

A partial or complete closure of the salmon fishing season in California and Oregon will be announced by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council on Friday, in a drastic move responding to disastrously low returns.

The number of salmon that returned to freshwater to spawn during 2007 were the lowest they have been since 1992; 2008 is expected to be even worse.

"This year both chinook and coho returns to Washington, Oregon and California were down," said Melody Palm-

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Pluto of Bo passes on

by Justin Nobel

Pluto Maroon, who read horoscopes on Bolinas beaches, repaired busted Volkswagens and once lived in a mail truck, passed away earlier this month. He was 76.

"He was a free spirit," said Eden Clearbrook, his longtime partner and mother of their daughter, Eve. "He had a tremendous ability to read through the lines and go way beyond the box. Eventually, he got too far from the box."

Pluto was born Cecil A. May III on July 16, 1931 in Detroit, one of more than a half-dozen children. The large family dwelled in a rough part of town; his father often drank and was sometimes violent. Pluto learned to become a mediator in family disputes. He loved his mother and

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a swarm when it's just hanging out on a branch, but they won't do cutouts," Cook said. "Since I have a construction background I'm happy to do it."

Brief history of honey

Honeybees began to swarm across America in the 1600s when early settlers brought hives of German bees, said Eric Mussen, a bee expert at UC Davis. Those first bees were smaller and meaner than the European honeybee, which is prevalent today, and quickly moved into the wild.

They were known by Native Americans as the "white man's fly."

These feral honeybees are all the same species as those tended in the hives of hobbyist and commercial beekeepers. Feral honeybees are populations that abandoned humans' wooden box hives to build combs in a place of their own choosing; but the genetics of both groups are basically the same, said Mea McNeil Draper of Fairfax, a master beekeeper who is part of the Marin Beekeepers Association.

Splitting, or "swarming," of bees is a natural part of their society. Honeybees live in colonies where a single fertile queen can lay 1,500 eggs a day. When a colony of bees outgrows its hive, the old queen flies off with some of the workers and drones to start a new colony and hive. A young queen will then be allowed to hatch and take over the existing hive, said McNeil.

The queens like to build new hives in dry, sheltered places such as crevasses in stone or the space within walls.

Sometimes beekeepers, such as Cook, capture those feral hives – returning one particular colony to a box. Bees in the hive and bees that roam free are really one population, though there are some differences.

"Bees that have been bred are often selected for high honey production," McNeil said. "Bees that are feral tend to collect more pollen. Maybe they revert."

Plight of the bees

Honeybees of all stripes are still swarming, but they face increasing threats to their survival.

"There's been a pretty big die out in the wild bee populations because of the diseases that have come in, primarily from us transporting bees around to pollinate crops," Cook said.

A plague of exotic mites killed off virtually all of the nation's feral bee colonies during the mid-90s, said Mussen. Commercial populations survived through regular applications of miticides.

"They really put a crunch on any good genetic stock that might have



Kalle Cook of Inverness Park attaches a segment of honeycomb to a hand built hive. Feral honeybees in Marin County have been pummeled by exotic diseases and the use of pesticides since the 1990s. Photos by Jacoba Charles.



Half of the nation's commercial bees are raised in northern California.

been out there in the feral colonies," he added. "Now feral colonies are much more likely to be from somebody's commercial line that swarmed and got away."

Honeybee varieties were most diverse around 1925. That's when the exotic mites were first found in Europe, and the United States closed its doors to importing bees from foreign countries.

Another problem, Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), has been decimating commercial apiaries and threatening bee-dependent crops such as almonds for the last four years. It is found in hobby hives and may affect wild bee populations as well, Mussen said.

"Bees just fly off and abandon the hive," he said. "They leave behind food, the brood, the queen. Nobody knows what causes it, we just know what happens."

Half of the nation's commercial beekeepers are in northern California, and nearly 25 percent of them reported being affected by CCD, Mussen said. The price of renting a beehive to pollinate an orchard has risen from less than \$30 per hive in the late 1990s to over \$140 per hive today.

Mussen added that CCD is a less common problem for hobby beekeepers than for commercial beekeepers. Santa Rosa hobby beekeepers didn't get affected until last winter, but eventually the mysterious malady arrived there as well. To date, it is not a problem in Marin County, said McNeil.

"People's grandparents who kept bees would just put them in a box and take out the honey," McNeil said. "Now it's really a matter of animal husbandry to deal with the bees. They take a lot of management."

Bees in Marin

Keeping things local is one of Cook's goals, and that might also be helpful for the beleaguered bees as well.

"There are fewer bees in Marin than there used to be, and it's also more difficult to keep them," said McNeil. She added that there are two schools of thought regarding how to best preserve healthy populations.

One is that breeding bees for specific traits – such as killing diseased brood cells – is the solution. The other is that local populations should be preserved, letting them evolve toward being able to live in the local climate, as well as with mites and other diseases.

Cook, who has hives of wild bees in his backyard, supports the second option. "Part of why I'm happy to deal with wild bees is that I get to help preserve the genetics," he said. "The health of bees has to do not only with disease resistance but also how they fare in a certain location."

Contact Kalle's Wild Honeybee Service at (415) 663.8412