**A Haven for Honey Bees in Redesdale**

We were told the Old English Dark Bee was extinct, dead and gone forever. But we found it living in Redesdale, and at Rothbury, and Gateshead, and Beamish, and elsewhere in an E- W band across north Northumberland. That was over 30 years ago and while elsewhere misguided beekeepers imported exotic queens and dosed their hives with toxins to kill Varroa mites that now ravaged their apiaries worldwide, those in Redesdale put their heads down and got on with life as before. Those bees shrug off varroa and all other diseases that justify employment of an inspectorate of bee disease specialists.

They utilise a combination of anti- varroa strategies that seem seems unique in the world. And that is one of several reasons why they are one of our greatest natural treasures and it is why some of us have striven to protect them. The availability of funds from revitalising Redesdale gave us that opportunity.

Around 20 years ago, I was invited to install a few hives of native honey bees on Whitelee Moor. They lived there, sometimes commensally with ants and common lizards, one under each of four roofs. One winter the two then surviving colonies were killed by pygmy shrews that squeezed through the mouse guards. Later that year one empty hives caught a wild swarm and a community of two became re- established. It was those colonies that provided the staff for the most northern of our three new conservation apiaries, to which our visits have been enlivened by sightings of magnificent wild goats, herons, an otter and a hen harrier, peregrine falcons, on one occasion a black kite, and on another a young, newly released golden eagle. We checked the bees’ subspecies by wing morphometry and aimed to have that confirmed by DNA analysis. But Covid 19 closed down the labs, our analyst was badly struck down and post-Brexit customs complications lost us our DNA samples. So that venture will have to await another day.

Because both sheep and cattle are destructive to bee hives our main concern has been to erect stockproof pens to house the hives and their construction swallowed up more than half our funds.

Redesdale honey is among the most delicious I have tasted, but we're still learning how much we can safely harvest and which is the best design of hive to house them through a Redesdale winter.

I very much fear that honey bees worldwide are heading for extinction. The signs are there, and even our Redesdale stocks are showing genetic contamination. But we hope the work we have put in here has have laid the foundations for a native honey bee reserve in Northumberland, the first north of Cornwall, that will keep our local stocks safe well into the future. We are now working towards persuading the Redesdale folk to help us declare the Dale a Voluntary Conservation Area, preparatory to declaring it a native honey bee haven.

We could not have made these advances without the financial support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the moral support of the Revitalising Redesdale Committee, the guidance of the Northumberland Wildlife Trust and the supportive interest of the people of Redesdale.

Thank you.

**Dorian Pritchard,**

Project Leader, Redesdale Bee Project, October 2022