

Swarm of Honeybees Just Needed a New Home

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A swarm of an estimated 50,000 honeybees left Ani Thomas' hive Saturday, searching for a new home. The bees were given a new hive and in a few hours had made themselves at home. Judy Hamilton photo

Jay Barrett/KMXT

Apparently when a bee colony gets a little too crowded, the queen will leave with about half of her minions to find a location for a new hive. That's what happened on Saturday to the honeybee colony owned by Kodiak's Ani Thomas. What's estimated to be 50,000 or more honeybees wound up swarming on a tree in her neighbor's yard, who then posted a photograph of it on Facebook's Friends of Kodiak page. That's where beekeeper Judy Hamilton first heard of the swarm.

"When I called and found out the location, I knew that it belonged to my friend Ani Thomas who also has bees for the first time this year. So since she was out of state, I volunteered to help, although I have not captured a swarm before. Tom Lance, who lives here in Kodiak did have experience in that. And so between Ani's husband, Tom and myself, we were able to capture them and secure them back where they belong."

Hamilton said all it took was giving the queen and her swarm a new place to live.

"Tom had a hive and so we put it right beside to the swarm and then cut the branch and laid it in that hive. And over the course of the day, they all trooped in there and were able to put a lid on it and trooped it back to Ani's property. Now she has two."

Hamilton, who is a first-year beekeeper herself, said she had read about this swarming behavior in the past, and says it is a reaction to the bees getting overcrowded in their current hive.

"So they will start to ... the workers will instigate the creation of a new queen, and then they will leave with the old queen. Half or more of the colony will leave the hive and go set up a new one somewhere else. And the new queen then hatches and whoever remains behind has allegiance to her. That's one way that bees reproduce and spread out."

The picture posted on Friends of Kodiak showed thousands of bees on a spruce tree branch. There were so many, they extended all the way down to the ground. Hamilton said it was even more impressive in person.

“You know, just looking at them was something. It was a sight to behold. There must have been 40- or 50,000. When we got the bees initially they came in a little box and that was supposed to be about 20,000, and this was at least twice as many. I’d say somewhere close to three times as many. It was quite a spectacle.”

With stinging insects apparently in greater number around Kodiak this summer, many people were rightly concerned the picture contained not honey bees, but wasps or hornets, and there were several suggestions on how to dispatch them. But Hamilton said the honeybees are very gentle, and in fact, when they’re moving from one hive to a new one, are even more mellow than usual.

“The truth is they’re actually pretty gentle. I mean that’s not say I haven’t been stung and they haven’t shown me that side. For the most part, they really are not interested in us. They have a job to do; they’re very serious about it, and they can sure do that job right along side us. You know, Ani has had several groups, 4H and curious people come to her house and she’ll open up her hive and show folks. Sometimes without even gloves. You know, she’s definitely been able to be one with the bees.”

Hamilton says she, like Thomas, has gotten a little bit of honey out of her hive, but does not plan to harvest any this year. Instead, she said she was going leave the honey in the hive in the hopes that it helps the population make it through the winter in good shape and produce even more honey next summer.