

# Varroa Mite Awareness Week

Two Interviews With Beekeepers

By Joanna Paul

To highlight the Varroa Mite Awareness Week, I interviewed two long-time beekeepers: Jim Coneybeare and Tom Congdon. I spoke with Jim and Tom about varroa mites, their preferred treatments and monitoring methods, and the changes they have seen in beekeeping.

## Jim Coneybeare Interview

Jim Coneybeare is a commercial beekeeper based in Wellington County, and the President of the Ontario Beekeepers' Association, as well as co-chair of the Ontario Animal Health Network – Bee Expert Network. He began going into bee yards with his father when he was four.

*Joanna Paul: How long have you kept bees?*

Jim Coneybeare: I am a third-generation beekeeper. My maternal grandfather kept bees, and he became a commercial beekeeper around 1925. My father was next to keep bees, and when I was growing up, we kept about 650 hives.

*JP: What is the name, approximate size and focus of your operation?*

JC: We are called "Coneybeare Honey" out of Fergus, Ontario. We currently operate from 800 to 1000 hives of bees. We have done some pollination, but the focus is on honey production. It has changed over the last eight or 10 years with the use of neonicotinoid pesticides. That's an added stressor.

*JP: How has the varroa mite changed beekeeping for you?*

JC: The varroa mite is another added stressor to the bees, so it definitely plays a role in hive health. I have to be a better beekeeper, stay vigilant, and plan management techniques and methods that take varroa mites into account.

Check out the rest of our Varroa Mite Resources here:  
<https://oahn.ca/resources/oahns-varroa-mite-awareness-campaign/>



*JP: Has varroa and what you know about varroa changed in recent years?*

JC: I think 15 to 20 years ago, varroa wasn't as much of a problem compared to today. Varroa is a stressor, as is the virus load that they impart. I believe what we are seeing is that pesticide use in combination with what the bees are picking up in the environment, can make them more susceptible to a virus load.

When I keep bees in non-cash crop areas, varroa doesn't seem to be as big a problem. I believe it's the viral load, although it is still being researched. When I'm not in cash crop areas, I don't have to be as vigilant. The levels of varroa can be higher—the threshold may be five or six percent when we decide to treat—and it doesn't seem to have an impact on the hive. In cash crop areas, however, I can't let levels reach two or three percent, and there seems to be just that added level of stress. It's important to note that varroa is accentuated by the other stressors. Outside of cash crop areas, my winter losses were as per usual, about 10 to 15 percent, even farther north where winters are more severe. In heavy cash crop areas, I was seeing 50 to 70 percent losses over winter.

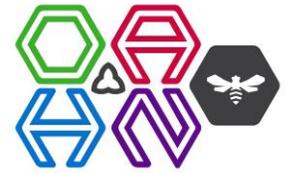
*JP: What is your favourite technique for monitoring, or what has worked well for you that you could share with other beekeepers?*

JC: I like sticky boards, but it depends on the crew that I have any given year, and how much muscle they have to move heavy honey supers, to do alcohol washes, and so on. I found it easier to send workers out to hit half a dozen bee locations and place sticky boards in. We then check them in two days to get the varroa mite level. To make sticky boards, I use file folders with a mix of shortening and petroleum jelly smeared on the folder. I have 8-mesh screen on my bottom boards.

*JP: Why do you think this type of monitoring has worked best, and would it work equally well for everyone?*

JC: I like sticky boards because I can send some workers out to do monitoring, while the rest of the crew are busy with other things. Although they have to return to check the sticky boards, it's not that big a deal. To do alcohol washes, however, it would be more involved to send more of my crew out to tear down a hive and get into the brood chamber. With the sticky board method, there's no need to find the queen first so there's no risk of damaging a queen. Before doing the alcohol washes though, it is safest to find the queen, which could be a chore in itself.

I like to leave the board in for two days. This gives me a good perspective of natural mite fall. I divide it by two to get a 24 hour count, and there's less room for error. I take into account the weather, especially if I have a rainy day and there are more bees sitting inside housecleaning. That could give a different picture.



*JP: How do you align this monitoring with your varroa treatment / management?*

JC: A treatable level is about 10 varroa drop in 24 hours. If I put a sticky board in prior to a treatment and I get a mite count, then I put a treatment in and I get a much higher mite count, it gives a good idea of the efficacy of the treatment. I could do another sticky board a week into the treatment, to get an idea of what is going on in the hive in terms of mite levels.

*JP: Are there other methods to keep varroa numbers down that you would try, or recommend, that other beekeepers try, such as drone trapping?*

JC: I don't do drone trapping. We run too many hives, and if we miss one day, and the drones hatch, we have released a whole bunch of varroa into that hive.

We don't do heavy testing going into winter. We get an idea in the fall, and we put a couple treatments on hives. It's not uncommon for us to do oxalic drizzle as a finisher. If the treatment is working, I won't need to do further monitoring. I know the varroa levels are low.

*JP: How important is varroa monitoring, especially with how many other activities beekeepers must balance these days?*

JC: Monitoring is important. We have to know the varroa load. Varroa is a stressor and it is directly related to the viral load. I can eradicate the varroa, but if a virus gets going, I can't take out the virus.

*JP: Are you familiar with any new research or developments concerning varroa?*

JC: There is research out that shows that a combination of treatments raises the efficacy. Following up a registered treatment with another carefully applied registered treatment, raises the efficacy of the controls, and helps prevent varroa from becoming resistant.

*JP: What advice would you give to a new beekeeper concerning varroa?*

JC: Varroa is probably one of the largest factors in bee health that a beekeeper can play a major role in. Monitoring allows us to determine when and how to treat. Just because a treatment worked well last year, it doesn't mean that it will work well this year. Environmental factors could affect it, such as temperature, or varroa could develop resistance. Those two factors can affect efficacy, so that is why it is important to monitor. Realizing that varroa can develop resistance, it is important to rotate your treatments.

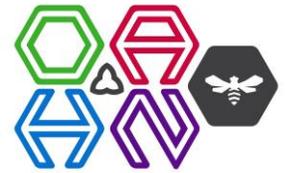
By the time I think I have varroa mites figured out, I get sideswiped, so I am always learning. I have to look at them as part of my management. It's not going to be the end of beekeeping, it's going to be the end of sloppy beekeeping. It makes us better beekeepers.

*JP: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about varroa mites and beekeeping!*

JC: You are very welcome.

**Contact us!**

Web: [www.oahn.ca](http://www.oahn.ca)  
email: [oahn@uoguelph.ca](mailto:oahn@uoguelph.ca)  
Twitter: @OntAnHealthNet  
Facebook: @OntarioAnimalHealthNetwork

**Tom Congdon Interview**

Tom Congdon is a commercial beekeeper, a board member of the Ontario Beekeepers' Association and former Canadian Honey Council chair for Ontario. His operation is among the largest honey producers in the province.

*Joanna Paul: How long have you kept bees?*

Tom Congdon: My family has had bees all my life. From the time I was 13 years old, I was working throughout the summer in the bee yard. I have 41 years beekeeping experience, and 36 years full time.

*JP: What is the name, approximate size and focus of your operation?*

TC: We are "Sun Parlor Honey" in Cottam area in Ontario. We have diversified with fruit orchard pollination in the springtime, and we do summer pollination for vine crops. Honey is our main focus. We run about 1300 colonies at the present time.

*JP: How has the varroa mite changed beekeeping for you?*

TC: When I first started keeping bees, we didn't have varroa mites. It has added a lot of extra work such as monitoring for mites and keeping track of how my treatments are working. We spend a lot more time looking for mites and sampling. My father, who will soon be 80, and I, inspect for mites in our operation.

*JP: Has varroa and what you know about varroa changed in recent years?*

TC: In the last two years, I have had to be more diligent about mite loads in colonies exposed to pesticides. Sometimes colonies that have had more exposure to pesticides will have more mite loads as well. I'm not sure why I am seeing that, but we tend to have more problems wintering those colonies. This year I have had 25 percent loss in winter. Another five percent were weak and they did not build well. They could have had a related viral load, and testing showed a lot of chemicals in the hive.

*JP: How do you sample?*

TC: We sample using the shaker bottle with alcohol. We find it is the quickest and most effective way to sample. We used to use sticky boards, but we find it is time consuming when we have to go back to the yards to check the boards. The alcohol wash in the shaker bottle gives an immediate result and then we can decide on our treatment methods at that point.