

Public asked to look out for honey bees

SCIENTISTS have asked the public to look out for native Irish bees this summer amid fears there are no indigenous honey bees left in the wild.

The aim is to settle the debate as to whether any indigenous Irish honey bees – *Apis mellifera mellifera* – persist in the wild.

Researchers at NUI Galway have already found more than 20 feral honey bee hives, including one in the statue of a lion in Roscommon.

Bee enthusiasts in particular are being asked to report any feral or unmanaged hives.

If the honey bees exist, then their gene pool may well prove important in the fight against the

By Leah McDonald

varroa mite, which is destroying hives all over the world.

The mite seriously affects the bee's health to such an extent that most beekeepers have to chemically treat them.

Professor Grace McCormack, of NUI Galway is leading the project, which has been funded by The Eva Crane Trust.

'When disease wiped out swathes of native Irish honey bee colonies in the past, foreign subspecies of honey bees were knowingly imported as a proposed solution to bolster numbers,' she said.

'Due to generations of interac-

tion with escapees of domesticated colonies, fears are that the Irish Honey Bee populations currently found in the wild are introgressed [mixed] with non-native subspecies and hybrid strains of French, Dutch, Italian and Russian extraction.'

The scientists hope to test two theories; that honey bees cannot persist in the wild and that colonies found in the wild are hybrids and not native bees.

'To test these assumptions, ideally we would like to identify hives that people know have been continually active for periods of more than two-three years,' Professor McCormack also said.

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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

The old horse show united communities

LAST Sunday, I found myself in a familiar setting. My parents had organised a horse show at the Coilóg Equestrian Centre in the heart of Co. Kildare. It is a stunning location owned and managed by Chris and Gwen Byrne, two people who have devoted their lives to the sport.

I was there to commentate, something I first did when I was only 17. I had toured the country competing on the pony show jumping circuit, but now it was time for something I had always longed to do.

As a child, I attended the Dublin Horse Show simply to listen the golden voice of John Wylie. I have previously written about my friendship with John, a man who commentated in the Main Arena of the RDS for 40 years until his retirement in 1984. He lived in Devon and, following his retirement, we corresponded for many years. The man whose voice was synonymous with those historic showgrounds taught me that, because speaking binds us to others, it must be polished and polite.

I was 18 when I first commentated at the Dublin Horse Show. It was only four years since John retired and yet the place still seemed empty without him. In some small way, I tried to sustain his spirit. The Dublin Horse Show was, however, only the culmination of the show jumping year. Each weekend, I would head off to gymkhanas all around the country. In the winter, my time was taken up with the indoor equestrian leagues.

A voice can make or break an event. The commentator is there not only to introduce horse and rider, but to guide the spectator through the day. He or she can lift the mood, heighten expectations and create the right atmosphere. That is why, as a young show jumper, I was always eager to know who was 'on the mic'.

On the national show jumping circuit, there were the familiar voices of George Dagg and Michael Slevin. Both men buoyed up young riders and gave them a sense of confidence with their calm words. Then, there was the inimitable Paddy Power from Kilkenny, a man who should never have been let near a microphone. He was small, dapper and kindly, yet he had a voice like sandpaper – loud, gritty and permanently hoarse.

You could barely make out what he was saying, yet Paddy was loved and cherished by generations of young show jumpers. His voice lacked elegance but that did not matter, for what Paddy gave each competitor was the type of encouragement that a father gives his child. We were his sporting children and it was his job to make sure we succeeded.

Paddy Power was a great character known to many through his voice. There were, however, people like him at every event on the equestrian cal-

endar. Each show had its own characters, those who gave it colour and charm. They were on the committees, serving tea and sandwiches, or simply strolling the showgrounds chatting to the competitors. For these people, many of them elderly, the annual gymkhana was the highlight of their year. For months in advance, preparations would be under way.

The venue itself had to be prepared. The show jumping arenas had to be manicured and carefully maintained. The great hospitality tents, the bunting and the stalls, all had to be erected and managed. It was a community effort to which everyone contributed. Even the children of the village were charged with selling raffle tickets throughout the weekend.

The annual gymkhana was more than a sporting occasion. It was yet one more way for the community to gather and celebrate their shared sense of identity, and to bind themselves to the land, to each other and to their common home.

WHETHER show jumping or commentating, I always loved meeting the organisers of each event.

The men generally wore trilby hats, braces on their ill-fitting trousers and old boots. The women made sure to dress in their Sunday best.

They were 'salt of the earth' people for whom this day was the summit of everything they had worked hard for. They always greeted you with a smile, a sandwich and a cup of tea. For them, you were much more than a competitor or a commentator: you were an honoured visitor to their home. These were social events that gave people a sense of belonging. They showed how nothing matters more to the rural Irish than community. Having travelled from the impersonal city, it was beautiful to behold.

What struck me the other day, as I returned to the mic for the first time in a decade, was what we have lost now that the age of the gymkhana has almost gone. With dedicated equestrian venues in each region of the country, it is rare to find a community in which the old horse show now takes place. It is rare to encounter a field full of horse boxes, tea tents, raffles and stalls.

It is rare to hear the likes of Paddy Power deafening the locals, yet giving hope and encouragement to nervous youngsters in search of their first rosette. Each community needs its 'Paddy Power' – its signature voice that reminds them that this place is theirs and, no matter what happens, we belong here together.

There was a world of difference between John Wylie and Paddy Power. As the years passed, however, I came to realise that there was just as much beauty in dear old Paddy's shattered voice. It was the beauty of an old and loved man reminding his extended family that they will never be alone.

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