

Renewing the Countryside



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Dennis Arp's Mountain Top Honey

The Sweet Life

Mountaineer, Arizona · By Peter Friederici

When he was a teenager growing up on an Iowa farm, Dennis Arp once went squirrelhunting with friends and came across some beehives. The boys decided they'd try to extract the honey. Dennis borrowed a veil from his dad, who'd kept bees in the past. Lacking experience, the youths didn't quite master the technique of taking honey from the hives of bees that didn't want to give it up. "Pretty soon there were bees inside the veil," Dennis says, "and we decided it wasn't worth it."



Dennis has had a bit more practice by now. He started keeping bees as a hobby at the suggestion of a couple of coworkers about twenty-five years ago, and now, from his home in Mountaineer, just south of Flagstaff, Dennis manages an enterprise of 1,200 beehives that on average produce 100,000 pounds of honey a year. As proprietor of Mountain Top Honey, he's a successful entrepreneur whose work is firmly centered on the Colorado Plateau, even as he sometimes sells his products in places as far-flung as Taiwan.

Managing bees is an exercise in timing and motion, especially for someone who lives at 7,000 feet where

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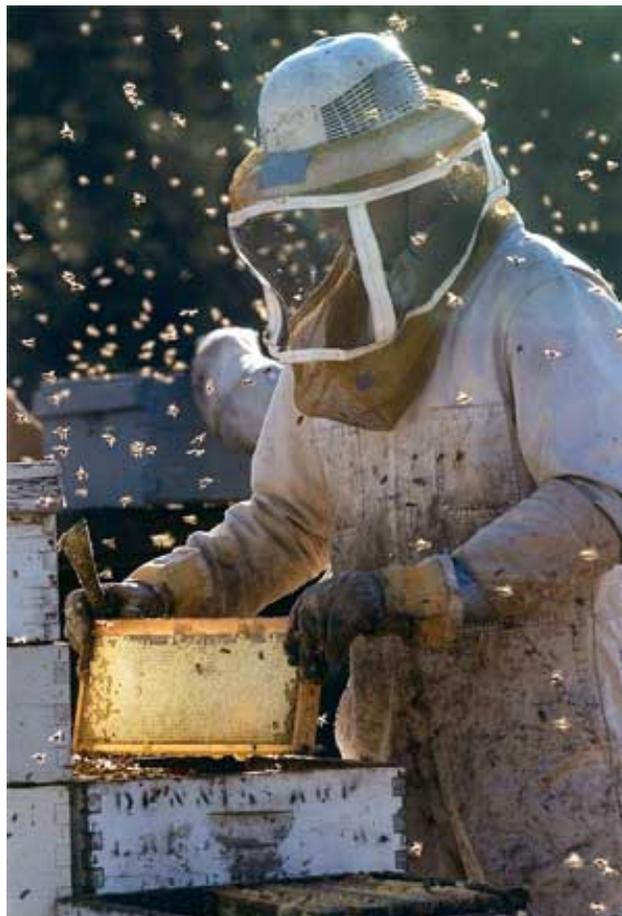
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nothing is in bloom for at least six months of the year. As a result, Dennis and his part-time assistant, Tom Hedwall, are on the road a great deal. At the beginning of February they travel to California to place beehives in the almond groves. Almond nectar doesn't make good honey, but almond trees must be pollinated by bees, and the growers pay well for that service. By mid-March it's time to move the bees back to Arizona and the dwindling orange groves of the greater Phoenix area. The orange blossom honey the bees produce there is light and tangy and popular with visitors and residents alike.

In May and early June, Dennis and Tom move the hives to the desert outskirts surrounding Phoenix, where the bees forage on catclaw, mesquite, and paloverde flowers. Sometimes the two men have help from Dennis's son, who is in college. Always they work long hours. The beehives are moved only at night, when the bees are resting. In the desert it's hot even at midnight. "We spend a whole lot of time in the middle of the night moving bees, then working all the rest of the day too," Dennis says. They drive a flatbed truck. The wooden hives are stacked on pallets and moved with a forklift. In one night they can move 120 hives – a tenth of his total.

By early summer the bees are moved to the Little Colorado River valley near Winslow and Holbrook, where the honey comes from camelthorn. This is a thorny and noxious weed, but it produces fine honey. When the summer rains start in July, it's time to move the hives close to home, to the grasslands and ponderosa forests around Flagstaff. Where specifically to move them is a roll of the dice. The monsoon rains are irregular. "Sometimes," Dennis says, "there might be flowers everywhere in one place, and you could go a mile one way or the other and not see any flowers. It can be kind of hit or miss." By the time a good bloom happens, it can be too late to move many hives there. Like a wise investor, he finds it prudent to split up his hives in various locations.



This summer the bees out by A-1 Mountain produced little honey, while those thirty miles to the southeast on Anderson Mesa made a bumper crop – a hundred pounds per hive. In November, after the bloom, Dennis and Tom extract the honey from the hives. They work in the “honey house” – a building the size of a two-car garage next to Dennis’s house. The yard is full of fifty-five-gallon drums and five-gallon buckets, mounds of yellow wax, and machinery of indeterminate purpose.



The honey house is crammed with hives and with the machinery needed to extract and process the honey. “All this stuff makes my electric meter spin pretty good,” acknowledges Dennis. Each hive consists of stacked white wooden boxes, each of which is lined with an array of rectangular wooden frames in which the bees build their combs and make their honey. To extract the honey, Tom places the frames on a pair of moving chains that carries them past a vibrating knife, which cuts the wax caps off the combs. Wax and honey slide gloopily down into a vat. A sweet, earthy smell fills the room. The frames continue moving on the chains into the “extractor,” a large stainless steel vat in which they’re spun at high speed. The centrifugal force presses out the honey. It and the leavings from the uncapper end up in a sump tank built into the floor, from which the honey is pumped into two holding tanks that each can accommodate almost two tons of honey. The leavings go into a small, square machine in which a heater separates the remnant honey from the wax.

It’s a process that looks messy, but in fact little is wasted. Dennis sells the beeswax to candle and salve makers, the pollen at health food stores, and the resin-like propolis, which the bees use to make repairs and which has antibacterial qualities, to makers of herbal medical products. He sells much of the honey directly to customers at a variety of stores and farm stands in northern and central Arizona; some goes to local restaurants; some is sold to a bakery in the Phoenix area; and then there is the occasional inquiry from Taiwan or elsewhere.

After helping Tom with the extraction process, Dennis sits by a row of five heated tanks at one end of the room. It's here that the honey ends up, in its diverse flavors and colors – orange blossom, desert wildflower, mesquite, camelthorn, Flagstaff wildflower – each heated to 130 degrees so that it can flow smoothly into glass jars. At one point he samples a bit of the honey that came from the ponderosa forest near Flagstaff this summer. It's tangy, almost a bit acidic, and very different from mesquite honey (dark, almost like molasses) and camelthorn (very light).

"It has a really nice, fresh flavor, doesn't it?" he says. "At an industrial scale you really lose that individual flavor and character. Most supermarket honey is mixed from honey from all over – Argentina, China, Mexico. You don't know where it's from."

That's far from the case with Mountain Top Honey. Dennis fills jar after jar from the barrels, labels them to indicate precisely what's inside, and places them in boxes that he'll drive himself to a local store. It is hard, grinding work to get the honey to this point, but as the accumulated sunshine of spring and summer, of goldeneye and rabbitbrush and buckwheat and fleabane, flows into the clear jars and glows golden under the fluorescent lights, it is also easy to be sure that it is sweetly, deliciously worthwhile.

This is one of many stories from the Four Corners region that were printed in A New Plateau: Sustaining the Lands and Peoples of Canyon

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