

# Bees in the Airstream

Apiarists focus on building healthy Napa Valley hives

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No doubt about it. Things are humming in the EMoViTO — the Enormous Mobile Vintage Trailer Observatory — parked in a grove at Connolly Ranch Education Center in Napa.

The hum, though familiar, is unexpected in this 26-foot Airstream Overlander circa 1966 with honeycomb colored walls. Inside are stainless steel counters topping rows of wire baskets filled with plant samples and seed packets.

Although there is artwork on the walls and waxy toys by the front window, there are none of the usual travel trailer amenities — no built-in stove, no dual-purpose breakfast nook, no clothes closet, no sofa bed, no toilet, no shower.

But still it's home to an easy-going, extended Napa Valley family that spends most days foraging for what it needs and once home, sharing discoveries.

There is a family matriarch but she keeps to herself. Rob Keller is the family's spokesperson, overseer, handyman, caregiver and staunchest advocate.

He has, one might say, taken this family — and others like it — under his wing.

Last week, as a group of youngsters attending the Connolly Ranch Dirt-to-Dine adventure camp were making the connection between what they eat, where it comes from, how to cook it and the vital role bees play in the process, Keller was providing a close-up look at a busy hive.

With the help of several young bee buddies, Keller unhooked wood panels covering a two-sided, floor-to-ceiling box by the trailer's back window, revealing the 30,000 members of this particular colony. The former residents of a vineyard owl box were going about their daily chores behind Plexiglas walls. More bees made their way in and out of the hive through a plastic tube leading through the trailer wall to the outdoors. The hum of rapidly moving wings added a pleasant counterpoint to the summer sounds drifting through the open windows.

Keller is the founder of Napa Valley Bee Company. The mobile bee hive is a dream of his that's been three years in the making and made possible through a grant from the Creative Work Fund.



Although Keller enjoys the flavors of locally collected honey his true mission is developing a genetically strong indigenous bee population in the Napa Valley which he believes will go a long way to solving some of the serious problems currently affecting European honeybee hives — the varroa mite and colony collapse disorder among them.

Education also plays a major role. Keller and his bees are regulars at Connolly Ranch in Napa and at Nimbus Arts in St. Helena. He teaches sustainable beekeeping to adults through the Napa Valley College. He and several colleagues are planting various cover crops to determine what makes good forage for bees.

Keller oversees hives on the St. Helena Montessori School's riverside property and monitors hives throughout the valley. He's the one people call when bees swarm in trees or on street signs, or try to set up shop in sheds, barns or PG&E boxes.

At the end of the month, from Monday, July 26 through Thursday, July 29, Keller and the mobile hive will settle in at the Napa Valley Museum. Not only will visitors get a glimpse into the internal structure of the hive and watch honey being manufactured, at 7 p.m. July 29 Keller will discuss the role of agricultural pollination, bee behavior and hive management.

The UC Davis graduate who holds a master's in fine arts didn't become interested in bees until college.

"I was working on a project that had to do with Egyptian funerary rites," he recalled, "and I wondered how I could seal them so no moisture could get in or out."

What eventually came to mind was propolis, a substance bees use to seal honeycomb and unwanted openings. It is also a way of protecting the hive from disease. Mortuary bees cover dead hive members in it before dragging them out into the open. Unknown objects introduced into the hive get the same treatment for the same reason — to protect the hive.

His interest piqued, Keller got his own colony of bees just before graduation. It wasn't long before he abandoned the fine art world and entered the world of beekeeping.

"Then I noticed there were holes in the way people were managing bees and in the way we were looking at bees," he said.

In those early days he realized that most of the honeybees he was managing were dying. He came to believe the solution lay in genetics, rather than the use of medications or pesticides — a common practice with commercial beekeepers.

"I'm not the only guy looking at beekeeping and saying we need to work with our own indigenous stock and to be more responsible," said Keller, who is working in tandem with a team of people, including Connolly Ranch education director Michael Lauher, Jason Grace, Lia Bettinelli and others. "Now we are on a big mission ... We are all on the same page and we are doing pretty serious work with bees and looking at genetics, rearing queens, managing hives and taking bees out of buildings. It's hard work, but we are having fun."

And with that said, Keller and a budding apiarist, Harry Matthiason, set out to collect an unwanted swarm of bees to re-situate in a hive waiting for them on the Matthiason family's five acres.