

“A good tool improves the way you work. A great tool improves the way you think.”

— Jeff Duntemann

I’ve always had a soft spot for Winnie the Pooh’s buddy Eeyore. He mostly just hung around in the background, never getting any special attention. But he was critical to the dynamics of the gang, providing somber reflection that balanced against the over-the-top enthusiasm of Tigger and the sophomoric scheming of Pooh.

In the beekeepers’ toolbox, I have a similar soft spot for an often-overlooked tool that I consider to be absolutely essential. It isn’t very versatile; in fact I can only think of a couple of things that it does well. But it does those like no other tool can. Yet in the standard list of tools that come with prepackaged beginner beekeeping kits, this tool isn’t even included. They typically give us what I consider to be among the most unnecessary and counter-productive tool in beekeepingdom, a bee brush, but not this handy-dandy task saver.

Of course I’m talking about a capping scratcher, also known as an uncapping fork. In my mind, the bare minimum contents of a beekeeper’s toolkit should be a smoker, strong pair of reading glasses, notebook, hive tool and a capping scratcher.

Whazzit good for?

A capping scratcher looks like an afro hair pick, except the tines are a bit thinner, closer together and extremely sharp. It has two uses in my bee yard:

1. Drone sampling/extraction

The tool is ideal for removing drone pupae from capped cells. Hold it at an angle, spear a row of protruding drone cell caps and pull the pupae straight out of the cells. If you are asking, “Why would someone want to do that?” there are several good reasons.

- 1) Drone pupae can be used as “canaries in the coal mine” to get a very rough assessment of a colony’s Varroa mite



A capping scratcher is indispensable for sampling drone pupae.

Photo: [Plant Health Australia](#)

infestation level. It isn’t dependable for quantitative assessments, but it can give an imprecise idea of whether there is little cause for concern versus a five-alarm problem. Pull out a few dozen or so young pupae, the more the better. Brown foundress mites are glaringly obvious against white pupae. But look fast – mites move extremely quickly when they are freed from cells and given the chance, they’ll quickly attach to a new host. If you don’t see any at all, hurray! But if you see some, the next step is to perform a more accurate and reliable test.

- 2) Folks who practice Drone Trapping as a small, contributing part of their IPM strategy against Varroa mites typically freeze the drone frames after they are capped. Subsequently removing the dead pupae before returning the drone comb to a hive saves the bees a lot of work.
- 3) Drone pupae are delicious when properly cooked and can be harvested in this manner for human consumption. See “[Thanksgiving Delicacies from the Hive](#)” for a link to recipes. Or feed them to your chickens, but I recommend tasting them first if you never have. You may decide that you deserve this delicacy more than the chickens do.

2. Uncapping honey

For my first honey harvest I did what the books tell us to do and used a special-purpose,

heated knife to remove the cappings from my honey frames. I ended up gouging the comb in places, cutting off slivers of wooden frame and generally making a mess. On top of all that, there were cells around the edges that didn't get uncapped. The standard advice is to use a cappings scratcher to revisit those frames and scratch the caps that elude uncapping.

What I discovered is that jumping to the end – using the capping scratcher as the means of removing all of the cappings, not just the stray, leftover ones – works extremely well for me. I no longer bother with a knife at all. I simply turn a honey frame on end and swipe the scratcher down its length, from top to bottom, in three or four long rows. The caps come off without any fuss. One may think that this would destroy the wax but with a little practice, not much force needs to be applied and, in my experience, the damage, if any, is far less than with other methods.

Caveats?

Usually, nifty tools come with caveats but I really cannot think of any with regard to my trusty capping scratcher. Make sure you don't accidentally poke yourself with it – as I mentioned, the tines are very sharp – but otherwise it performs as promised. A bonus is that they are typically reasonably priced, 8 bucks or so for a perfectly good one. So if you aren't yet a fan, add one to your toolbox. And if you have more uses for one than I have mentioned, please let me know so I can enjoy mine even more!

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Instead of using a clumsy knife, a capping scratcher can quickly and easily remove honey cell caps. Note that the technique shown in the photo isn't recommended. Instead, long swipes the full length (not width) of the frame work best at my place.
Photo: Luc Viatour <https://Lucnix.be>