

Cicada Killers Are More Bluff Than Threat

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In the late summer it is common to start to see large wasps flying around our yards. Now, when I say large I mean LARGE! These wasps have a very distinctive black and yellow abdomen, can exceed one inch in length and be nearly as big around as your index finger. These are cicada killers and while they look rather intimidating, they really aren't that big of a threat!

Cicada killers are solitary nesters. Each hole has one female in it. The female flies around looking for cicadas. Once she finds one she will attack it and sting it. The two will often tumble to the ground in a loud and noisy display. The sting doesn't kill the cicada, it merely paralyzes it. The cicada is too big for her to just fly away with so she has to haul it back up a tree or pole to get enough elevation so that she can fly, or glide, back to the nest site.

The nest is in a tunnel in the ground. Cicada killers like to nest where there is bare ground, often right along a driveway or sidewalk or in the middle of a garden or flower bed. The entrance hole is often surrounded by finely granulated dirt, much like an ant hill. Once back to the nest site she hauls the cicada into a nest chamber and lays one egg on each cicada. Once she has hauled in several cicadas over a several week period she will seal up the nest chamber and leave. She will spend the rest of the summer feeding on nectar and pollen.

While being solitary nesters, Cicada Killers will often nest in close proximity to each other so it will look like there is a swarm. Here's where it gets tricky. Female cicada killers do all the work and they rarely stick around the nest site for long. Haul in a cicada, pull it underground, lay an egg and go out after another one. The male cicada killers are not involved in this process. They have one purpose and one purpose only which is to mate with any unmated females. They will patrol the nesting area(s) chasing away other males or anything else that comes into their "zone". If there are multiple females nesting in an area, there may be as many as a half dozen male cicadas per female hanging around.

Only female cicada killers have stingers which they generally use only to paralyze cicadas. If you pick up a cicada killer or pinch it in clothing, they will sting and it will hurt like heck! But the purpose of their sting is to paralyze cicadas, so the effects of the sting should go away fairly quickly. Males have no stinger, as it is with all bees and wasps. The males that buzz you and fly at you when you are around the nest sites can't sting. They are just trying to bluff you to get you to leave their zone and any new unmated females that arrive! As I said earlier, the females don't spend much time around the nest site. Haul in a cicada, drag it underground, lay an egg and back on the prowl!

You could go along and spray wasp killer in every hole you could find, but that wouldn't impact the males. They never enter the nest holes so they'll never come in contact with the insecticide. You can try to spray the ones flying around, but it's not easy to do. Some people resort to getting tennis racquets and have a little swinging practice!

Once the females leave the nest site for good, in a few more weeks the males will disappear too. The eggs that the females lay this summer will soon hatch and the larval cicada killers will feed on the hapless paralyzed cicadas. They will pupate over the winter and emerge next summer. In the long run, trying to spray to control them isn't practical so I encourage homeowners to just marvel at yet another of our wonderful critters!