

Yellow Jacket Season Is Upon Us!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Labor Day generally marks the time of year when yellow jackets are going to start showing up in greater and greater numbers. Yellow jackets are often called hornets and they are closely related to bald faced hornets. But hornets make the football shaped paper nest in a tree and are not that common around here. Yellow jackets generally nest in the ground or sometimes in an old rotten tree stump and are very common around here.

Yellow jackets sort of look like a streamlined honeybee with yellow and black stripes around their abdomen. Yellow jackets are those annoying little bees that like to hover around our food and drink in picnics towards the end of the summer and into early autumn. Once we've had some really good hard freezes, they are done for the year, but from now until then you need to be aware if you are outside, especially with food in hand!

At the end of the season, new yellow jacket queens emerge from the colony, mate and then fly off to find a sheltered location to spend the winter. The rest of the colony dies with the increasing cold weather. In the spring, that one queen comes out of hibernation and starts to build a new colony. She finds an old abandoned mouse tunnel or someplace usually underground and excavates it larger to suit her needs. She builds a paper nest and starts raising some female workers. As these first offspring become adults, they start taking over many of the tasks in the colony.

Early in the year the queen is doing all the work. She's building the nest, laying the eggs, and feeding the young. She doesn't have time to bother you unless you present a direct threat. But as the summer moves along, the colony gets bigger. The queen starts focusing all of her time on egg laying. The workers are doing additional nest building and food gathering. About this time of year the colony even develops guard bees who's only purpose is to protect the colony. So the yellow jacket nest that you've been walking by or maybe even mowing over all summer long, suddenly becomes an issue the next time you walk by it! With all those extra workers, the yellow jackets are everywhere looking for food, especially sweets and protein.

Yellow jackets are ultimately beneficial. They feed on lots of caterpillars and they serve as pollinators for many plants. Unfortunately they have that nasty habit of stinging people when they are disturbed. If you find a yellow jacket nest and can simply avoid it until frost kills them off, that is the best approach. Sanitation is also helpful. If you are eating outside, keep food and spilled drinks picked up. Regularly rinse out trash cans to remove any food debris that may attract them. There are numerous traps on the market that can be used to attract yellow jackets away from areas you may frequent.

If the nest is near an area where people frequent, then control may be necessary. Yellow jackets are very susceptible to insecticides especially the wasp and hornet type aerosol sprays. Don't waste your time trying to spray one or two while they are flying. Take the time to locate the entrance to the nest. Do this carefully. Then once you have it located wait until night so that all the workers are inside. I prefer the foaming aerosol sprays and just empty the can into the nest entrance. But do so with caution and be ready to beat a hasty retreat. Monitor the area and retreat in a few days if necessary. Or just stay inside until winter and then it'll be safe to go outside again!