

Yellow Jackets Are Getting Active So Look Out!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I usually figure that it's going to happen about every other year. So sure enough, Friday night while I was mowing I went over the top of, or a little too close to, a yellow jacket's nest and got stung, once on the top of each ankle. That was followed by about 24 hours of "discomfort" and then about two or three days of rather intense itching!

Yellow jackets are a member of the wasp family, specifically in the insect order Hymenoptera and the family Vespula. Yellow jackets are fairly small, generally about a half inch long. They tend to look more like a stream lined honeybee than they do one of the thread waisted paper wasps. These are the rascals that hang around you food and drink at late summer picnics.

Yellow jackets are primarily ground nesters, unlike their well known cousin the bald-face hornet that makes the large football looking nests in trees. They are a colony based wasp but unlike their distant cousin, the honeybee, the colony dies out at the end of the season and only the new queens overwinter.

When spring comes around, the queen goes in search of a nest site. Yellow jackets prefer some hole in the ground, like a rodent tunnel, or a void around a tree trunk or rotting stump. Once she locates a suitable nesting site she gets to work. She starts by building a paper comb. She then lays an egg in the first comb and continues building more comb and brood chambers. As the first egg hatches she splits her time between feeding the young worker larvae and building more comb and laying eggs. She is obviously very busy.

As the first adult worker emerges from the brood chamber it starts helping to build more comb and feed the other young. In spring and early summer, all the energy and attention is on building the size of the colony. During this time you can walk right over the nest and you will probably be ignored. They have more important things to do then rush out and sting you! But that all changes as we move into August and September.

As the colony becomes larger and more developed, the various workers take on very special assignments within the colony. The queen is now being tended to and all she does is lay eggs. Another group cares for the young larvae while others are out foraging for food. The last caste to be developed are the guard workers. Once they start to emerge, everything around the nest changes. I'd mowed this same spot in the yard a half dozen times this year and was never bothered. But since I last mowed, the guard yellow jackets had emerged and this time they got me!

Once you encounter a yellow jacket nest, running away and steering clear of the location needs to be your first reaction, especially if you are allergic to bee stings! After things have calmed down go back and watch for the yellow jackets coming and going to the colony and carefully locate the entrance to the nest. Again, if you are allergic, let someone else do this and the following steps!

Do not stage your attack on the nest during the day. Wait until after dark when all the workers are back at the colony. Have someone else hold the flashlight on the entrance hole from a safe distance. Then, armed with one of the foaming wasp sprays, spray as much into the entrance as you can and retreat quickly. After a few days go back and observe if there is still activity. If so, wait until dark and repeat the process. Continue this until no activity is observed at the nest site.