

## **It's Yellowjacket Season**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

From early August on until a hard freeze we are likely to encounter a member of the bee and wasp family of insects known as a yellowjacket. Yellowjackets are those critters that like to visit us at late summer and fall picnics as they attempt to get to our food and especially any sweet drinks that we may have. While our interactions with these rascals is often innocuous enough, these late season encounters sometimes go very bad.

Yellowjackets are related to hornets. In the bigger scheme of things they are beneficial as they feed on caterpillars and other insects. They are attracted to sweet liquids and protein sources like meat which is why they are always the uninvited guests at late summer picnics. They are about one half inch long, stout bodied with yellow stripes on a black body. They sort of look like a streamlined honeybee.

Yellowjackets overwinter as new queens that emerged late in the season. These young queens often mate in the early fall and then find a location to overwinter, frequently with other new queens. When spring arrives these queens locate a suitable nesting location. This is usually a hole in the ground like an abandoned mouse hole or similar. The new queen starts constructing a paper nest in this underground home. Once she has some cells made she'll lay an egg and start feeding the young worker. As the young worker emerges as an adult she'll start helping the queen. As spring becomes summer and more and more workers emerge, eventually the queen can stop foraging and nest building and focus on just laying eggs.

The first workers are dedicated to nest building and food gathering. But once the colony has gotten large enough, usually about the middle of August, new workers can start to focus on also being guards for the colony. Yellowjacket workers have a strong and painful sting and they can sting multiple times. Trust me, I know! A colony may be close to your house and you've been walking by it all summer long without being bothered. But then that one fateful day arrives after workers become guards and as you walk by you are viewed as a threat and out they come to sting you. Ouch!

If the colony is located well away from where people might encounter it, it's often best to just leave it alone. But if it is located in the yard where people regularly are, it needs to be controlled. Carefully locate the entrance. After they've been agitated they'll often swarm around near the entrance for a while. Approach carefully, but not too close, to try to see where the entrance is. You may have to wait until after dark and carefully walk up to the area with a flashlight to find it. Once you have it located you will want to get an aerosol wasp and hornet spray. I like the ones that spray a long ways and foam up as you can fill up the nest entrance better.

You don't want to go out and attack the nest in broad daylight as too many of the workers may be out foraging for food. Wait until after dark and spray the entrance hole with a good thorough soaking spray, then turn off the flashlight and make a hasty retreat. The next few days monitor the entrance to see if there are many or any workers still coming and going. You may have to treat several times over the course of a couple of weeks. If you are allergic to bee stings, do not try this yourself. It is too risky. Ultimately I'd prefer that they just be left alone, but sometimes the nest is in a location where ignoring it just isn't practical.