

Wasp and Hornet Season

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I received a text from a friend in North Carolina recently that started out, "I discovered a yellow jacket nest 15 minutes ago. Unfortunately they saw me first..." I chuckled slightly and then shuddered a little bit recalling similar unfortunate encounters. August and September are certainly the time of year we really need to be aware that wasp and hornet (the latter includes yellow jackets) nests/colonies attain the size that they can really become a threat.

Let's start by identifying our concerns. Paper wasps (polistes) are the wasps that build the papery single-layer comb underneath eaves. Bald-faced hornets are stout wasps that build the fully enclosed football shaped nest that they enter from the bottom. Yellowjackets are about a half inch long and look like a streamlined honeybee. These are the ones always trying to get into your soda or food at fall picnics. Hornets are quite uncommon around our area. I see a hornet's nest maybe once every five years or so. The other two are extraordinarily common.

Both polistes and yellowjackets feed on caterpillars and are actually quite beneficial. The problem with all of these though is that at the start of the season it is usually just a single queen starting the colony. As the season progresses and the colony grows larger workers start to develop special roles including guard bees. You can literally be walking the same path every day all summer long and going right beside one of these nests with no problem. But then one day, there are suddenly guard bees and as you walk by, they come out after you! There can be several of them and unlike honeybees that sting once and die, these rascals can and will sting repeatedly!

Paper wasp nests are fairly easy to locate. Unless they are in a location of regular activity (like the one I just found underneath my mailbox), it's preferable to leave them alone. But if they need to be controlled, wait until dark and then, armed with a can of aerosol wasp and hornet spray, (I prefer the foaming kind!) soak the nest down. It's helpful to have someone else hold the flashlight, and if you miss one, they will invariably fly towards the light!

Yellowjackets present a special challenge however! For the most part yellowjackets nest in underground burrows. They often take over an abandoned rodents burrow or sometimes around the trunk of an old tree where rotting roots have left voids. In my many personal encounters with these rascals the first pass with the lawnmower gets them agitated. Then when you come back for the next pass they are out looking for a target and here you come! I've learned that when I'm mowing this time of year I keep an eye looking to the ground where I'd just mowed to see if there are any unhappy yellowjackets flying around just a few inches off the ground.

When you encounter a yellowjacket nest you need to move slowly and cautiously to determine where the entrance is located. This is important because you want to come back after dark to launch your assault. Again, my preference is one of the aerosol foaming wasp and hornet sprays. Be sure you have a full can when you start. As these products are usually designed to have a concentrated spray at some distance you can often stand back several feet and then just discharge as much as you can into the entrance hole, hopefully filling it up with foam that is also getting all the way in to the main nest. This may take anywhere from five to ten seconds. Then make a hasty retreat. The next day, in the daylight, come back carefully and spend considerable time looking for any yellowjacket activity. Do this for several days. If fresh activity is detected, treat it again after dark. One final bit of advice on this, if you are allergic to bee stings, have someone else do the treating!