

Cicada Killers Are Not Asian Giant Hornets

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Last weekend I saw my first cicada killer. Which coincided with yet another television segment about the totally misnamed “murder hornet” which is actually the Asian giant hornet. So before I receive panic stricken phone calls let’s just clear the air. The huge wasp looking insect that you are seeing fly slowly around yards and turf areas is NOT an Asian giant hornet, it is a cicada killer. Asian giant hornets are only known from a small area in extreme northwest Washington State. So just relax!

Cicada killers are native to Kansas and have been here for as long as cicadas have been. The cicada killer is a big wasp, often easily reaching one and a half inches long. It is a robust looking wasp with reddish brown markings on its head, thorax and wings, with yellow and black markings on it’s abdomen.

The adults feed on nectar and pollen and will often be found around flower beds. The males are also always patrolling for newly emerged females that haven’t mated yet. Males will get incredibly aggressive with other male cicada killers and anyone or anything else that’s in the space that they are trying to claim as their own just in case an unmated females emerges or shows up. The thing to remember is the these males, like all male bees and wasps, have no stingers. They will fly at you, around you and try to scare you off. Ignore them!

Female cicada killers do have stingers. They use their stingers to paralyze cicadas. The venom is designed not to generate pain as a defense, but to paralyze a food source for their young. They will sting humans, but very rarely. You basically have to pick up a female or get one inside your clothing to get one to sting you. While they have a respectably sized stinger, those who have been stung say it’s no worse than a sweat bee sting. I’m not going to try it to find out though!

Cicada killers are solitary nesters. You have one female who digs a hole in the ground, often along the edge of a sidewalk or driveway or in a flower bed. This entrance tunnel will have brood chambers off of it. Each brood chamber will have one to three paralyzed cicadas placed in it and an egg laid on it. The young larvae will hatch out and have all the food it needs to complete its life cycle and emerge next year. The brood tunnel can be rather extensive. Researchers have documented females moving 100 cubic inches of soil which can leave a rather healthy pile of dirt in your yard or flower bed. You can have several females nesting in the same area however.

Females will find a cicada, sting it to paralyze it and then drag it up a tree or pole to glide back to the nest or simply drag it to the nest. The cicada is too big for it to just pick up and fly away with. One female may lay as many as 15 eggs. Which means that in all honesty she is far too busy to worry about you. Once the egg laying is complete she will live out the rest of the summer feeding on pollen and nectar.

Generally I advise homeowners to just ignore cicada killers. Let them do their thing and then they will just disappear. If you are concerned that pets or small children are at risk you can treat the tunnels as they develop. You can fill the tunnel up with one of the foaming wasp and hornet sprays. I’d suggest doing this about dusk. If you can still find carbaryl (Sevin) dust you could put some of this down the tunnel as well so she contacts it as she enters and exits the tunnel. As I said, they may be a nuisance but they really aren’t a threat so the best approach is often to just ignore them!