

“Murder Hornets” are Nothing to Worry About

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Some days I read something in the news and I just shake my head and quietly hope it goes away quickly. That was the case several weeks ago when I saw the headlines flashing “Murder Hornets...” I felt like Charlie Brown in every TV special. “Oh good grief!” Let’s just set the record straight. They aren’t in Kansas and they likely won’t get her in anybody’s life time! So let’s all just calm down and return to reality.

The Asian Giant Hornet, *Vespa mandarinia*, is native to China, Japan and SE Asia. In the fall of 2019 a nest was discovered in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. That’s an island off the Pacific coast of extreme southwest Canada. The nest was destroyed. A couple of individual hornets (workers, not reproductive queens) were found 10 to less than 40 miles away from where the nest was found. That’s it. As this year unfurls there are traps being set to find if there are other workers that may be coming from another unfound nest. If they find more workers they will attempt to track down that nest and this will continue. It’s the way the USDA Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) works. And they are very good at it.

Yes, if they were to get established in an area they can create problems for honeybee hives. But honeybee hives already have problems so that is nothing new. We’ve had other hornet pests move into the US without drastic results. European Hornets moved into the eastern US in about 1850 and haven’t been a major issue or spread very much. Imported fire ants are another story (ants, bees and wasps are all related to each other by the way).

What far too few people realize are how many people, around us every day, have life threatening allergies to bee stings including the good old honeybee. Over 60 people die every year in the US from allergic reactions to bee/wasp/hornet stings. Yes, the Asian Giant Hornet is big and has a powerful sting. But it isn’t instantly deadly. Like all bees, leave them alone and they’ll leave you alone! So if you see those headlines or read something in Facebook, just remember, we’re in Kansas. We’re 1500 miles, as the hornet flies, from where these are being found. You don’t need to be worried!

But before they start showing up again this year let’s talk about some of the bees, wasps or hornets that we will likely be encountering before the summer is over. Carpenter bees look like bumblebees but with a shiny black abdomen. Cicada killers do look like a giant wasp. They are reddish and yellow and can be up to two inches long. Both of these species are solitary nesters meaning that the queen is also the worker and is creating brood chambers, in wood for carpenter bees, in the ground for cicada killers.

Males of both species tend to hang around where there might be unmated females hoping to mate with them. The males will fly around, fight with each other and try to scare away anything bigger than them. The thing is, males don’t have stingers. They are all bluff. Females of both species do have stingers but they tend to use them for offensive purposes not for defensive purposes so someone has to really work hard at getting stung by them!

The last one people need to be aware of is the good old yellowjacket. They nest in the ground and the queen slowly builds her colony all through the summer. They are all too busy to pay any attention to you walking by them on a daily basis. Then the colony hits that magical size in late July or August, you walk by and there are now guards to lay one or more nasty stings on you. But that’s a column for later this summer! So forget the Asian Giant Hornets and worry about yellowjackets!