

Bees, Wasps, Hornets, & Yellow Jackets

by

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With summer around the corner (June 21st), kids and adults are looking forward to fun times, vacations, trips to the beach, camping trips, and summer heat as cold winter temperatures recedes into the past.

As the days warm up warnings about sunburn, deer ticks (Lyme disease) and mosquitoes (West Nile virus) abound. But the one thing we rarely hear about are warnings about bees, wasps, hornets, and/or yellow jackets (collectively called bees).

There is a distinct difference between mosquitoes and bees, wasps, hornets and yellow jackets. The main difference is that mosquitoes will bite us whereas the others use a stinger to inject venom.

Mosquito bites are often small, round itchy bumps that we tend to scratch. Mosquitoes are responsible for the majority of insect bites worldwide (NIH). While it is rare for anyone to have a severe allergic reaction to these bites, they do pose a health issues, especially with where you live. Mosquitoes can carry viruses, bacteria, and parasites that they can transmit, causing severe and even life-threatening illness. Among the diseases that they can carry are:

- Malaria
- West Nile virus
- Dengue Fever
- Yellow Fever
- Viruses that cause encephalitis

On the other hand, “bee” stings can be more serious and even deadly. It is common for most of us to fear “bee” stings. This fear is called “**spheksophobia.**” it is normal for us to fear these stings because they are very painful with a burning sensation, and often result in a drop in blood pressure, dizziness, and can cause life threatening anaphylaxis (difficulty breathing, tongue swelling, nausea, and unconsciousness, rapid heartbeat, vomiting, and possible stomach pain). If you know or suspect that your are allergic to bee stings be sure to carry an EpiPen whenever you go outdoors.

Typically when bees are around and flying near you, our reaction is to swat at them. This is not a good idea as it usually agitates them. The closer they are to their hive the

more agitated they become. Also some bees, such as yellow jackets, give off a pheromone which attracts more bees from its colony when you swat or kill them.

So what do I do to avoid getting stung?

Wasps nests are either above ground (most wasp species) or underground (solitary wasps and yellow jackets).

Above ground nests are fairly easy to spot and identify. There are many different ways of getting rid of these nests as long as they are small. However when the nests are large, you may want to hire an exterminator to destroy them and kill the wasps/hornets.

Underground nests are harder to spot and given the aggressiveness of the yellow jacket and propensity to attack as a group, it is harder to get rid of the nests and avoid getting stung.

In addition to underground nests, yellow jackets are also known to nest in wood piles, dense vegetation (leaves, ivy, kudzu. etc.), utility boxes, and other enclosed spaces such as wall voids.

Unlike solitary wasps, yellow jackets can become very defensive and protective of their nests if disturbed. Loud noises and vibrations from machines such as lawn mowers can cause them to become very aggressive. Even vibrations from footsteps or walking too close to a nest can make them become defensive.

If you see yellow jackets coming and going out of a single hole on relatively flat ground or a hole in a wall, you're in luck. However that is not generally the case. Most of the time you need to "track" yellow jackets to find out where they are nesting. This means following their flight back to the nest and/or observing where there is more yellow jacket activity around a certain area.

Once you have located the entrance to their nest, you can take steps to eradicate the wasps and their nest. It is important to not only kill the yellow jackets but to also destroy their underground nests. Abandoned nests can become breeding sources for other pests such as rodents, snakes, etc. View the following link to learn how to track and treat yellow jackets:

<https://www.techletter.com/Archive/Technical%20Articles/yellowjackettracking.html>

Doing Yard Work

If we have a yard we often have to maintain it. That means mowing the grass, trimming

bushes, and cleaning up debris. With a little care you can avoid being stung, or at least minimize the number of times you are stung, when doing these activities.

Before doing any yard work, observe the area where you are going to work. Look for flying insects and try to determine what they are.. When mowing, always be on the lookout for bees and wasps. Wear light colored clothing with long sleeves and trousers, not shorts. Yellow Jackets and other insects are attracted to sweat so it is best to mow in early morning where they are not as active and when you will not sweat as much.

When working around bushes pay particular attention to flying insects. Notice if they are congregating around a specific bush or area. If they are, do a careful investigation so that you do not cause any aggression. Before working on the bushes, look to see if there are snakes or other creatures lurking in them. Use a long handle rank to “rattle” the bushes and allow any critters to escape.

Like working on bushes, if you are picking up debris or otherwise working around logs, railroad ties, etc, perform the same lookout as above. If picking up or moving buckets, logs, wheelbarrows, etc., never turn them away from you. Always turn the “top” toward you or roll the logs toward you. You can always drop the item back into place and slow down any “attack,” whether by wasps, bees, snakes or other critters.

Note: In this commentary, bees, wasps, hornets and yellow jackets have been collectively called bees. Hornets and yellow jackets are a species of wasps. Bees are not part of the wasp species. Though not as aggressive as wasps, bees will sting if threatened.

It should be noted that in many states it is illegal to kill honey bees. There are two types of honey bees:

- European Honey Bees
- African Honey Bees (=killer bees)

Two other common bee species in the US are bumblebees and carpenter bees, neither of which produces honey. However, both are essential to pollinating flowers and increasing crop yields.