

Beware of yellow jackets



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

We were relaxing on the patio of the lodge, between the morning and evening hunts. The Argentina sun was blazingly hot, so I had changed out of my hunting clothes into something much more casual. The ensemble did not include shoes.

An insect was doing its best to annoy me by flying around my face and ears. I caught a glimpse of it, noting it was the size of a kaiser roll. My first instinct was to swing at it, which I executed successfully and with amazing accuracy, knocking the hummingbird-sized beast to the ground.

I lost sight of the beast and quickly forgot about him, until I stepped on it with my bare feet. Yes, he stung me. The pain was immediate, and on a scale of one to 10, registered somewhere between unbelievable and unbearable. A rather large South American wasp had hit me. So large, in fact, I think it could have been tracked on radar.

Seems I have had problems with stinging insects my whole life. A batch of yellow jackets that lived under our front steps plastered me somewhere around my fifth year of life. My grandfather had told me to stay away from the steps because the yellow jackets had made a nest there. That was all the prodding my little adventurer mind needed to go investigate.

About 90 percent of the “bee stings” suffered by people in Colorado come from the western yellow jacket, or *Vespula pensylvanica*. They are the most common stinging beasts in our home state, being members of the wasp family.

Wasps are primarily known as yellow jackets throughout the country. There are some differences in appearance, habits and nest making, but I don’t want to get up too close to make the identification.

Yellow jackets are quite aggressive, and feared by most human beings, but they do have a useful place in the food chain. They are predators of most harmful pest insects. Yellow jackets consume dead insects and eat flies.

The yellow jacket reaches a half-inch in length at maturity. They are a social wasp that lives in a large nest that houses the colony. These wasps are black with yellow markings on the front of the head and yellow banding on the abdomen.

Due to their size and shape, they are often mistaken for bees. Seems to me that’s a mistake someone will only make once because bees are generally not aggressive.



This nest is located in a tree in our neighborhood. Looks like we will have an ample supply of the yellow and black beasts for a while. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

The colony has a social standing that includes the queen, drones and workers, each with specific tasks to help support the colony. The queen will lay hundreds of eggs and the male drones main function is to fertilize a receptive queen. The workers do many different tasks needed to operate and maintain the nest.

Springtime is when the yellow jacket queen, called a foundress, begins work on the nest. She collects wood fiber, which she then chews and mixes with saliva to make a paper-like substance for the nest.

The nest can be huge, containing multiple layers of paper cells that look similar to a honeycomb. A new nest is built every year. Birds that are searching for food usually destroy the old, abandoned nests.

The queen is the only member of the colony capable of surviving the winter. Beginning in April, the queen builds a small nest and begins raising sterile daughter offspring. These workers will take over the duty of enlarging and maintaining the nest, foraging for food and caring for the offspring, while the queens job is to lay more eggs.

A mature colony can grow quite large and impressive by summer’s end. Population of the nest can include a single queen, and up to 4,000 winged infertile female workers. Some colonies have reached an estimated population of near 15,000 individuals. That is a lot of stinging power if you come in contact with the nest.

The yellow jacket tends to nest in secure places such as hollowed out logs, rock piles, eaves of buildings and everywhere in the rafters of our barn. They can be very ferocious when defending their nest. Often times, a person may unknowingly disturb the nest and that usually ends up with a painful retaliation.

Abandoned rodent holes are a common nesting ground. If you see a few wasps hover-

ing around a spot on the ground, it is likely a nest site, which is your cue to exit.

Wasps have a tendency to become more aggressive as the summer wears on. This is because the size of the colony is steadily increasing and the food supply steadily decreasing.

It is very easy to aggravate the yellow jackets. There are many instances where sounds and vibrations coming from a lawn mower have triggered an attack, even from quite a distance.

The sting of a yellow jacket is very painful, and they can sting relentlessly when provoked. They have a lance-like stinger, armed with barbs that may become detached and lodge in the skin, especially when the wasp gets inside the clothing. A single wasp can sting several times in an attack.

Wasp venom contains a pheromone that causes other wasps to become more aggressive and join in the fun. Never swat a wasp near its nest of other wasps, lest you trigger a greater attack.

Usually the sting of a wasp wears off after 24 hours, but can be very painful in the meantime. There are some people who have a reaction to the sting, which can cause anaphylactic shock, and can be fatal. These are the people who should be extremely careful around

wasps and their nest. Most allergic reactions to a bite occur within the first hour after being stung.

If you do get stabbed by one of these little beasts, wash the area well with soap and water. A bit of ice on the injection site usually helps with the pain and swelling. Some people have found that a stick deodorant, containing aluminum, will help with the sting.

People who have been stung many times during an attack who have difficulty breathing, allergic

reactions away from the sting site, redness or swelling over an excessively large area, stung in the eye or swelling in the mouth or throat should seek emergency medical treatment.

I have often thought about Noah and his wisdom for including wasps on the ark. If he did, they probably stung him, just to show their gratitude. I have been stung so many times, I can’t keep track. I am constantly on a seek-and-destroy mission for them and

their nests around our place, and I always wear my shoes now.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org. For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@icloud.com.

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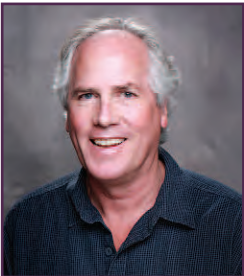
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