

Wasps, yellow jackets and hornets



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Call them what you like, but to me they are all black and yellow monsters. They are probably the only species on the planet that truly hate me, and the feeling is mutual. Over the last few years, there seem to be an uptick of the amount of nest these beasts build on our property. Normally, I would have to conduct an assault on a half dozen nests a year, but lately, the numbers are closer to 30 or 40. I have to do sorties in the backyard on a near daily basis, and I still can't kill them all.

I have been stung at least a dozen times this past summer by the yellow striped monsters. Whenever I get stung, out comes the spray cans of poison, and an aerial reconnaissance begins. We now buy wasp spray by the case. I wanted to sign up for subscription deliveries so I wouldn't have to reorder so often, but my wife vetoed the idea. We have those wasp traps hung all over the yard and enjoy watching them get caught in them.

About 90 percent of the "bee stings" suffered by



One of the most hated creatures on the planet is the yellow jacket. Sadly, his worth in nature is often not recognized. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

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. Some people mistake wasps for bees because of their size, color, and shape. That is a mistake a person will only make once because bees don't sting like wasps do.

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. If I get within five feet of one, I get stung.

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 queen's 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.

Wasps tend 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. Just what we need, cranky wasps.

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. The multiple sting thing occurs whenever the wasp wants to hit you, based on his level of anger.

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, lest you trigger a greater attack from his cohorts.

The venom of a wasp contains three proteins that act as allergens and a variety of vasoactive amines and peptides. The intense pain from the sting is due to serotonin, wasp kinins, and acetylcholine. The major allergen in the venom is called antigen 5.

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 in an attack, 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.

The long-lasting wound usually is from a wasp that decided to hit you multi-

ple times. I am currently looking at a bite on my wrist that occurred a month ago and still feels itchy once in a while.

Apparently, I should stop my daily patrol around the property and learn to live with these beasts. Wasps are very important in keeping the ecosystem balanced, providing a natural pest control service. Without wasps, the world would be overrun with spiders and other nuisance insects.

The economic value of their pollination services to agriculture alone is valued at over 250 billion dollars a year worldwide. Wasps are also the top predators of crop-damaging pests like aphids, and their value as crop protectors is worth over 400 billion dollars annually worldwide.

Because of their value, I should leave them alone. My wife says I should try and find a way to live with them. I explain that I am learning to live with them, but until they honor the 1000-yard restraining order I have against them, I shall respond with heavy artillery strikes from the wasp spray and continue to cover the yard with claymores in the shape of wasp traps.

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STARS

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the help of Stargazing Trail, it's even easier to find a spot nearby, especially on this side of the state.

Karl Wetlaufer, president of the Black Canyon Astronomical Society, said even a short drive out of Montrose promises great views—and adds you can still see the stars from many spots in town.

He said the Stargazing Trail is a "great initiative," and hopes it will inspire locals to enjoy and protect the night sky.

"We're lucky to live in the rural western U.S.," he said, later adding, "Dark skies are really a precious thing."

Wetlaufer is glad Montrose locals can still see the stars in and near town, and noted responsible lighting practices like utilizing downward-facing light shields, motion-activated lights and warm-toned lights are steps home and business owners can take to protect everyone's views of the sky.

Unfortunately, he noted, the recent wildfire smoke has made stargazing difficult anyway. But as it clears, locals have plenty of crisp, cool, starry nights and special events to look forward to.

A quick gaze at the Stargazing Trail turns up plenty of Dark Sky loca-

tions nearby, including the entire communities of Ridgway, Paonia, Nuclea, Naturita and Norwood. And, of course, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Curecanti are some of the closest Dark Sky Parks.

But, here are a few more spots and events to put on your radar if you're looking to spend some time under the sky this summer.

Lake City/Slumgullion Center

If you're up to a little driving, Wetlaufer notes the stars are extra clear at higher elevation, and Slumgullion Pass near Lake City is one of the best spots. The Slumgullion Center, just outside of Lake City, is a nearly 60-acre protected property owned by the Lake Fork Valley Conservancy and designated as a Dark Sky park. Local astronomer Phillip Virden and the Conservancy host weekly stargazing parties here every week, offering visitors a chance to build community while staring into the cosmos. The events run every Tuesday night from 8:30 to 10:30 p.m. until Aug. 25.

Camp V

Located just outside the Dark Sky community of Naturita, Camp V is a glamping destination with an artsy flair. Guests can camp in their own tents or campers, or rent out one of the facility's unique accommodations.

CampV hosts private events as well as its own occasional happenings, and offers a special experience called "Stargazing and Snuggles" that owner Natalie Binder explained "includes pillows, local cider, warm cookies and a star chart."

"It is such a unique container to experience stargazing and truly connect with the night sky," she said.

Gunnison Valley Observatory

The publicly-owned, volunteer-managed Gunnison Valley Observatory is open until Sept. 5 and offers talks and tours throughout the summer. The observatory hosts Astronomy Talks every Friday and Saturday night at 9 p.m., which are followed by a chance to view the stars through a variety of telescopes. Guests can also purchase a separate dome tour ticket, which allows them to get even higher and peek through the observatory's 30" telescope.

Black Canyon Regional AstroFest

The annual collaboration between the Black Canyon Astronomical Society and the National Park System returns Sept. 11-12, and Wetlaufer encouraged locals to check it out. The event usually involves a night at both the Black Canyon and Curecanti, and talks as well as telescope viewing opportunities.