

Wasps, Yellowjackets, and Hornets

Wasps, yellowjackets, and hornets can become a problem if they are found near humans and domestic animals. These insects may nest around homes, in commercial buildings, farm structures and equipment, in parks and in other areas where people live, work, and play. We usually consider wasps as beneficial because of the number of caterpillars, beetle larvae, flies, and other insects some of these species feed upon or use to provision their nests. Others may play a minor role in plant pollination and thus benefit man. Whenever they become too numerous, nest in close proximity to human activities, or become attracted to food being used by humans, some control is necessary.

Nesting Habits and Venom

It is important to distinguish between the different types of stinging insects commonly called wasps, yellowjackets, and hornets. Insects properly referred to as wasps have either social or solitary nesting behavior.

Digging wasps and mud daubers are examples of solitary wasps, since individual females construct and provision their nests. As a general rule, solitary wasps are unaggressive even if disturbed and seldom defend their nests. Their sting and venom is used as an offensive weapon to paralyze their prey, which consists of many insects and their relatives. The venom of solitary wasps has anesthetic properties and usually is not a serious problem with man.

On the other hand, social wasps such as yellowjackets, paper wasps, and hornets use their jaws and legs to attack and subdue prey. Being social, their nests may contain up to thousands of individuals. Workers of the social wasps use their venom as a defensive weapon and often attack in large numbers any threatening animal or human. The venom is designed to produce intense pain and may cause a dangerous systemic reaction in allergic individuals.

Solitary Wasps

Cicada killers are large (1 ½ inches long) black and yellow wasps that become a nuisance in landscapes when cicadas are present in shade trees. Males cannot sting but buzz around humans and appear dangerous because of their size and wasp appearance. Females will not sting unless forced to do so.

Control is rarely necessary for this otherwise beneficial insect. The female may dig galleries in lawns, gardens or flower beds, where she lays eggs and provisions the young with paralyzed cicadas. This nesting activity may damage lawns or vegetable gardens. If control is necessary, sprinkle the insecticide dust into the burrow and tramp the entrance shut with your foot. Mud daubers are wasps that build small, tube-like nests of mud material under eaves, in attics and under roofs of outbuildings. Nests are generally provisioned with spiders, which the young

larvae feed upon. Adults are about 1-inch-long and blackish or iridescent blue-black in color. They have a longer and slenderer waist than most other wasps.

Nests can be removed easily by hand with a knife or other object, since the attending female will not try to defend her nest. Even after using insecticides, it's generally a good idea to scrape away the nest and dispose of it to prevent dermestid beetles from feeding on the remains and later infesting other household areas.

Social Wasps

Paper wasps are slender, narrow-waisted wasps about 1-inch-long with long legs. They are reddish-orange to dark brown or black in color, often with yellow body markings. They produce small colonies that build tiny umbrellas of a paper-like substance. The nests are usually located in open areas, the small honeycomb of larval cells oriented downward. They are often found under eaves or in attics and outbuildings freely accessible to the adult wasps.

Care should be taken in removing the nests and applying insecticides because these wasps are more aggressive than the solitary wasps.

The common species of hornet we find in Utah is the large bald-faced hornet. It is about 1-inch-long, a blackish species with white markings especially on the front of the head. These hornets construct large inverted pear-shaped, paper carton nests up to 1-foot-wide and 3 feet long. The grayish or brownish nest contains 2 to 4 horizontally arranged combs with a round entrance hole at the bottom. Nests may be found hanging under porches, in outbuildings, in trees or even attached to the side of a structure.

There are hundreds of individuals in a bald-faced hornet nest. The hornets become very aggressive when aroused or disturbed, and the sting can be very painful. For these reasons, control of this species is usually left to the professional pest control operator. Even with the proper protective clothing, one should be very careful when applying insecticides and removing the nests. Directly spray the nest opening then soak the entire nest. Nests posing no threat to humans should be left undisturbed since the hornets are beneficial predators of other insects.

Yellowjackets are closely related to the bald-faced hornets but usually build their nests underground. They are generally small, about ½ inch long, and colored black and yellow. Large colonies of up to 6,000 individuals build soccer-ball-sized paper nests similar to those of the bald-faced hornet. The nests are commonly associated with old rodent burrows and other cavities in the ground or under objects lying on the ground. Entrance holes may be in lawns, gardens, flowerbeds, creek banks, or vacant fields. It is unfortunate that these colonies are often disturbed by walking, mowing, and other innocent human activities. When disturbed, yellowjackets are aggressive and can inflict a painful sting repeatedly.

Apply insecticides into the entrance of the yellowjacket nests at night, then plug the hole with insecticide-treated cloth, cotton or other objects. Approach the site with caution since some individuals may be guarding the entrance even after dark. Attractant traps are available which effectively eliminate localized populations of yellowjackets over time, although their action is slow compared to insecticide treatments.

Control

Essentially the same chemicals are registered in Utah for all species of yellowjacket, hornet, and wasp control. Wisdom should be used in how the chemicals are applied. Follow the label directions on the specific brand or formulation. Wasp traps with attractants are available and attractant baits mixed with insecticides are sometimes used, as well as spraying the nests, nest sides, and nesting areas with pesticide.

Pressurized liquid formulations of insecticides intended for control of wasps, yellowjackets, and hornets include numerous formulations.

Dust formulations labeled for soil treatments can be used to control ground-nesting species. Active ingredients in these formulations that should be effective against wasps include bendiocarb, cyfluthrin, deltamethrin, diazinon, permethrin, synergized pyrethrins, and silica hornet yellow jacket gel.

Products containing a rapidly volatilizing organic solvent mixed with synergized pyrethrins or with D-phenothrin plus D-trans-allethrin (synthetic pyrethroids) are available in some areas. This type of formulation quickly freezes the wasps and coats them with an insecticide. In the case of aggressive species this can be very useful.

Many other products direct a spray of pesticide (up to 20 feet in a long, fine jet) at the nest site, so the applicator can remain at a safe distance. These types are included among the formulations of pressurized liquids mentioned above.

Control involves treatment of the nest with an insecticide, or in some cases, removal and destruction of the nest (such as by burning). However, either of these activities can be dangerous. Some wasps, yellowjackets, and hornets become more aggressive when disturbed and especially when something threatens their nests.

When treating the nests of wasps, yellowjackets, or hornets, there is always a chance of being stung. For this reason, persons who are not willing to take the risk of being stung should leave control to a professional pest control operator.

The use of beekeeper-type protective clothing (a veil, long gloves, and coveralls tied at the wrists and ankles) is also advisable when treating the nests of stinging insects. This is

particularly true for large nests located in areas where the applicator cannot escape to shelter after applying the insecticide, as some insects may escape the treatment and pursue the applicator.

Disturb the nest as little as possible when applying insecticides and remove nests after dark when the insects are less active or inside their nests. When using a flashlight, cover the lens with red cellophane since these insects cannot see red light easily. Specific notes regarding treatment or nest removal of solitary wasps, paper wasps, bald-faced hornets, and yellowjackets are given in the discussions of solitary and social wasps above.

Sanitation

Some yellowjackets and hornet species scavenge for meat in addition to preying on live insects. Others are attracted to the sweets and sugars of candy wrappers, pastries, or soda cans deposited in garbage cans. These local populations can be reduced by removing the waste frequently and maintaining tight lids on all trash receptacles.

Pesticide strips containing dichlorvos attached to the inside of garbage can lids will also help to reduce both fly and yellowjacket presence. Various other insecticide spray and fogger formulations are available for the treatment of outdoor garbage cans.

Attractant traps (for example, Rescue Yellowjacket Traps by Sterling) are also effective in areas around garbage cans, at least for those species that respond to the particular attractant.

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