**Yard and Garden – 11-14-09 – Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant**

Pinned to a bulletin board hanging on the east wall of my office is an array of insect specimens, and beside the specimens are written descriptions. I've titled the display, *Insects — they're everywhere. Don't you just love em?*

When visitors stop by, they usually notice the display. Some shudder and move away from the exhibit; others inquisitively study the display and begin talking about one or more of the specimens. Interestingly, most of these six-legged critters were given to me. After finding insects in or around their homes, people often bring me their specimens asking the identity. Most often they ask if it's harmful and what they can do to get rid of it.

Although most individuals do not welcome insects into their homes, life as we know it wouldn't exist without them. While many insects are classified as beneficial, others such as roaches and ants have developed such an interdependent relationship with humans that they seek food and shelter in the security of our homes, often becoming horrific pests.

This past week, a visitor stopped by my office holding a jar containing two elongated, skinny dead critters. Placing the jar on my desk, she asked, "What are these?"

"Where did you find them?" I responded.

"They're in my maple trees, and they're killing them," she commented.

Spilling the specimens out on my desk for a closer look, I saw some prominent characteristics that made me think, "These guys wear white hats." They were not guilty of killing her trees; rather, they were indirectly trying to save them. I was quite sure they were *Megarhyssa macrurus,* more commonly called giant ichneumon wasps. To be absolutely sure of my diagnosis, I asked if I could keep the specimens to photograph and send via email to the UNL entomology department for positive identification. Shortly thereafter I received my confirmation. Immediately, I dropped her a note sharing some bizarre information about these amazing critters.

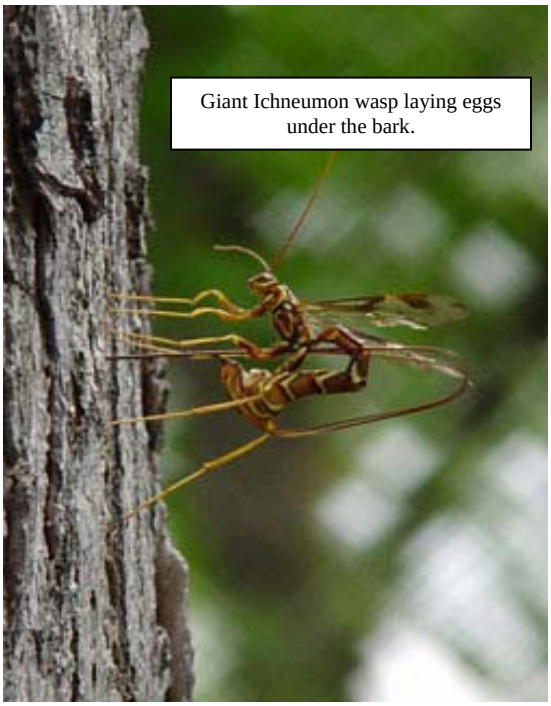
As it turned out, another wasp called the pigeon tremex horntail, known from here on as a horntail, was the actual culprit causing the damage to her maple tree. The adult female horntail lays her eggs on the bark of the tree. When the eggs hatch, the larvae bore into the tree feeding and living within the wood. These larvae create infection, accelerate decay and weaken the tree. If not destroyed, they grow into adults, emerging from the tree leaving visible round exit holes. Severe infestation can cause the demise of the tree.

Along comes the good guy, the giant ichneumon wasp. It is a parasitic wasp. Both male and female are brown in color with yellow and orange markings. Both have slender, elongated bodies. Only the female has unique long tails (ovipositors), extending a couple inches in length. Altogether, the body and ovipositor of this insect may extend more than five inches.

Interestingly, a female ichneumon wasp can detect the horntail larvae beneath the bark. She uses her long ovipositors to penetrate the wood, tunneling into the body of the horntail larva.

There she lays her eggs, paralyzing it. When her eggs hatch, the ichneumon larvae feed on the paralyzed horntail larva. Later they pupate, remain dormant under the bark and emerge as adults the following summer. Despite their rather fearsome appearance, the giant ichneumon wasp is harmless to humans and cannot sting.

Giant Ichneumon wasp drilling into wood with ovipositor



Giant Ichneumon wasp laying eggs under the bark.

To see and learn more about this amazing insect check out Colorado State University Extension site http://www.ext.colostate.edu/PUBS/insects/of605.html

The wasps given to me were somewhat damaged, dried and brittle. I now have them in a jar with moist towels, hoping to relax and soften their bodies. Soon, they, too, will be pinned and displayed on the bulletin board.

*Insects —they're everywhere. Don't you just love em?*