

Cow Killer or Velvet Ant

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Fast Facts

- The cow killer or velvet ant is really a wasp.
- Females have coarse, very brightly colored hair, no wings and a long stinger.
- Both male and females will produce a squeaking sound when alarmed.
- The female can inflict an excruciating sting if handled or stepped on, which is how they got their name. The venom is not very toxic and no cow has ever died.



Cow killer is the most common velvet ant in Nebraska. Photo by Jody Green, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County.

Description

The female cow killer ant is a large hairy, wingless wasp that very much resembles an ant. Velvet ants can be up to 1-inch long with a black body with coarse and bright reddish-orange hair on the head, thorax and abdomen. The males are larger than females; possess dark brown wings and different color patterns on its body. It is often difficult to determine whether males and female specimens are the same species because their physical appear-

Biology

Velvet ants are solitary wasps. Males fly in search of females to mate. The mated female will a ground nesting bee or wasp nest, and lay eggs on or near the other insect's larva. They are parasitoids because their larvae emerge and feed on the host's larvae, killing them. Adult velvet ants feed on nectar.

Defenses

Female velvet ants though grounded, have many defenses. They are quick movers with a very rigid exoskeleton and can release smelly odors. In addition, they are capable of delivering a very painful sting. Only females have a large needle-like stinger, which is a modified egg-laying organ called the ovipositor. If handled or stepped on, she can inflict an excruciating sting. They are not aggressive and are not dangerous to humans or pets and their venom is not medically significant.

Management

Despite their massive defenses, velvet ants are not aggressive. If you see velvet ants around your home, no need to worry. Just leave them alone and wear shoes when outdoors in the lawn. No control measure are necessary and they are not an indoor pest.



The stinger of the female velvet ant. Photo by Jim Kalisch, UNL Department of Entomology.