

Giant Wasps and Yellow Jackets

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I've had a few very large, black and yellow wasps brought in for identification. This happens every year, but this year people are wondering if these might be giant murder hornets.

They are not giant murder hornets, which have not been found in Nebraska. They are cicada killer wasps which are the largest wasps, up to two inches long, found in our state. Despite their size, they are docile and not much of a stinging hazard.

Male wasps can be territorial and fly towards you to discourage you from coming close to nests, but males lack a stinger. Females have stingers, but avoid people. You would need to grab one or have it caught in your clothing to be stung.

Cicada killers are most abundant when their prey, cicadas, are active. Cicada killers sting and then carry paralyzed cicadas to underground burrows. These burrows are found near walks, driveways, and retaining walls as small mounds of fresh soil around a one-half inch hole.

Once the paralyzed cicada is dragged underground, the wasp deposits an egg on it. After hatching, the wasp larva uses feeds on the cicada. Cicada killers are solitary wasps so there is only one per nest. They can be communal though with a number of wasps found in one area.

To discourage them, run a sprinkler a couple times a day where they are burrowing and they may go elsewhere. If someone in the home is allergic, nests can be treated with an insecticide dust.

Another wasp that shows up in mid to late summer are yellowjackets. They are medium sized and also yellow and black. Yellowjackets are social insects, not solitary; hence they defend their nests if disturbed.

They construct globular paper nests, usually in underground cavities. Favorite nesting sites are rodent burrows, compost piles, wood piles, and wall voids. Occasionally, these wasps will build aerial nests in garages, crawl spaces, or other enclosed areas.

When yellowjackets are disturbed, give them plenty of room as they are capable of inflicting multiple painful stings. If yellowjackets become excited and appear about to attack, do not make any sudden movements and retreat slowly from the area.

Yellowjackets are scavengers and frequently found foraging in compost piles and garbage receptacles. Their activity can be discouraged by covering all food at picnics and disposing of trash in covered containers. Turning compost piles regularly and placing insecticide-impregnated resin strips in the lids of garbage cans and dumpsters will reduce yellowjackets in these areas.

Where yellowjackets need to be controlled, strategies depend on nest locations. For aerial nests, treat the nest from a safe distance and after dark with a liquid or aerosol jet spray insecticide. Remove the nest a day or two later.

For ground nests, treat the nest with dust or liquid insecticide after dark. Approach the nest very carefully as a number of yellowjackets will typically be guarding the entrance. Apply the insecticide, then quickly seal the nest opening with a shovelful of dirt, a sheet of plywood, or a flat rock.

Insecticide dusts are preferred because workers attempting to use the nest opening will track in the dust and contaminate other colony members. Retreatment may be necessary after a few days if yellowjacket activity continues.