

# Field Notes

Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre

August 2006



## WASPS

Wasps is a common name applied to a large group of insects from the order Hymenoptera. It includes the sawflies, the parasitic wasps, and the stinging wasps. There are about 75,000 species of wasps, most of them are parasitic.

Many people confuse bees, which are fuzzy and only feed on flower nectar, with wasps, which have shiny bodies and are predators. The stinging wasps are the ones with which we are familiar. All female stinging wasps can defend themselves and their nests by using their ovipositor (tube for laying eggs) to inject venom. Males do not have a stinger. No species will attack a human except in defense. If the colonies of some yellow-jacket and hornet species are disturbed, they may respond by releasing more than 100 defending wasps, each capable of delivering several stings.



A subgroup of wasps (the vespoid wasps), which include the yellow jackets, hornets, and paper wasps build intricate nests. These nests are made of paper fibers collected from dry wood and bark and mixed with the saliva from the wasps. In each nest are one or more combs (like those in a bee hive). Over the winter most wasps will die, only the queen will survive. Wasps will not reuse a nest.



Wasps play an important role. As many wasps are predators, they eat enormous numbers of flies, caterpillars, and other insects. Other species of wasps act as pollinators and drink mostly nectar.

## Did you know?

That Yellowjackets deliver 225 flies per hour to the young in their nests.



That a dying Yellowjacket releases an alarm pheromone, or smell, that alerts other wasps. In less than 15 seconds, Yellowjackets within a 15-foot radius will come to the victim's aid.



That wasps do not die after stinging.



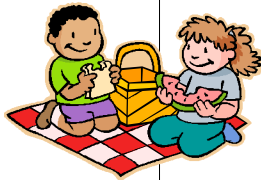
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## Which wasp likes picnics?



Yellowjackets (*Vespula* spp.) are the wasp that show up to every picnic in late July and August. The adults are attracted to ripening fruit, nectar and bits of sweet tasting food; they will even carry off bits of food! Yellowjackets have a stout body boldly banded with yellow (sometimes white) and black. They create a paper nest in the ground or at ground level in stumps and fallen logs.



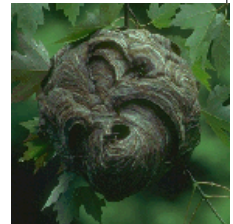
The females will aggressively defend their nest and will sting repeatedly.

To avoid being stung:

- Remove all outdoor food sources attractive to wasps (including pet food, fallen fruit). Be sure to bury food scraped deep in compost piles and keep garbage cans tightly covered.
- Watch where you sit or step.
- Never swat at a Yellowjacket — it is a good way to get stung. Instead, quietly move away or let the wasp leave of her own accord.
- If you disturb a nest, protect your face with your hands and run.
- Pick fruit in the early morning or evening while it is cool and most wasps are still in their nests.

## Which wasp builds the big hives?

Hornets are the wasp that build the large grey nests that look like they are made of paper. Yellowjackets are a subgroup of hornets and Bald-faced hornets are a very common species of hornet.



The adults drink nectar, fruit juices and may eat other insects. Hornets have a black and white pattern on the body. Adults are extremely protective of the nest and will sting repeatedly if disturbed.

## But I thought those big hives were paper wasps...

Paper wasps do build a paper nest but it is open, so that the cells are exposed and only one layer deep (like a honeycomb). The adults drink nectar and juices from crushed and rotting fruit. They are slender, with a reddish-brown to black body with yellow stripes.



Although, paper wasps are much more tolerant of people and minor disturbances than Yellowjackets or hornets, they will sting if you disturb their nest.



Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre is a joint project of Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Province of Manitoba

