

Creature Feature: Summer 2016

By W. Scott Douglas

Yellow Jackets and Bald Faced Hornets

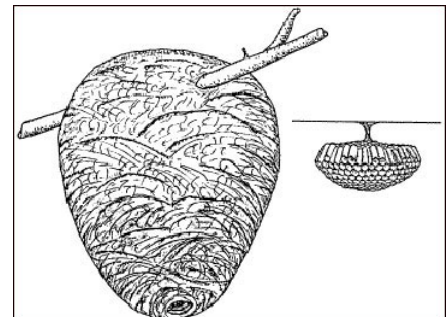
When I was a youngster, I spent a lot of time poking around outside, turning over rocks, climbing trees and generally sticking my nose into any crack or crevice that might hold an interesting animal. Usually this kind of thing was rewarding and probably is why I still like to do it. Occasionally though, I disturbed something that did not just try to get away. I still remember opening up a nest box in my grandparents' willow tree and finding not a bird's nest, but a nest of bald-faced hornets. We were all very surprised. My father was amazed, saying that he had never seen anyone *run* out of tree before. Needless to say this put some caution into my exploring – probably not a bad thing. But for a long time I rarely had anything good to say about wasps or yellow jackets. Many others feel this way too, and I have found myself needing to remind folks that these common insects are a very important and necessary part of our ecology. The fact is, not only can we learn to live with them, but we should actually encourage them to take up residence.



There are number of stinging social insects in the Watershed, but let's focus on the ones that cause the most fear and loathing, yellow jackets. Yellow jackets are members of the family Vespidae and include what are commonly called ground wasps and bald faced hornets. Yellow jackets are in the genus *Vespu-la*, and bald faced hornets are in the genus *Dolichovespula*. Yellow jackets are black with bright yellow markings and are up to ½ inch in length. Bald-faced hornets, on the other hand, are black with white markings on the face and lower abdomen and can be up to ¾ of an inch in length.

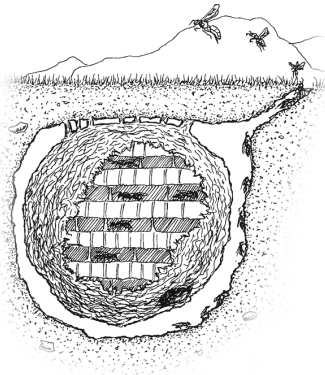


Both species will aggressively defend their nests, but because the yellow jacket makes its nests either on or in the ground, it is considered much more aggressive than the bald faced hornet, which makes a large paper nest either in a tree or under the eaves of your house, barn or shed. I usually find yellow jacket nests when I run over them with the lawnmower, with the typical result....ouch! Since the colonies can hold hundreds or even thousands of workers



by mid-summer, neither species' nests are small. While the entrance of a yellow jacket nest is typically smaller than a baseball, the nest itself is usually the size of a beach ball. Bald faced hornets build impressively large paper nests that can reach 14-18 inches in diameter and be up to 2 feet long. Inside the nest is a series of stacked combs made of paper pulp where the eggs are laid and larvae raised. In our area the nests are started by the queen in mid May, reach their full size by mid August, and have run their course by mid September. All the workers die at that time, leaving only a few fertilized queens to find some loose bark, hollow tree, rock pile or other crevice to overwinter in.

Unlike honeybees, which have a barbed stinger and can only sting once, yellow jackets have smooth stingers and not only can but will sting multiple times in defense of their nest. Not only is the sting painful, but for some it can be lethal. Some people are highly allergic to bee



venom, and the sheer size of some colonies can overwhelm small children if they stumble into them. Despite this danger, I encourage people to leave the colonies alone if you can. Why do you ask? Because yellow jackets and hornets are not only native pollinators, but they also eat an enormous number of biting flies like mosquitoes, gnats and horseflies, which they chew up and feed to the larvae. Because of the sheer size of the colony, just one large nest can keep your yard gnat free all summer long. As long as the nest is out of traffic areas, I'd rather have the bees than the flies any day. I simply mark the nests with garden fence so that I don't accidentally go inside

their defense perimeter. The hornet nests are usually high enough off the ground that they don't interfere with my activities at all. This policy eliminates the need to use pesticides in your yard, or on your person – a true win-win. Unfortunately, having a nest around may spoil backyard meals, especially in late summer when the colony can be particularly hungry. There is really no effective way to keep the bees away from your picnic other than covering the food and putting it away promptly after eating. And make sure to shake soda and beer cans before you take a sip if they are left unattended. If you really need a nest removed, either because of its location or sensitivity to the stings, call a service rather than spray yourself. It's safer for you and for the environment. I actually found a service that will extract large colonies for free (they use the bees to make antivenin).