



What's in a name?

What's in a name? A wasp or hornet by any other name would sting as much! The terms "wasp" and "hornet" are used quite interchangeably by most people. I tend to call those that have a long thread-like waist wasps, and those with a thick waist hornets. At any rate, they all seem to be unwanted guests at our picnic tables and in our yards.

The life history of the family Vespidae, to which they belong, is quite interesting and unusual. Fertile females hibernate over winter in secluded surroundings. In the spring, these females awaken and begin to start new colonies. They do this by constructing nests, one cell at a time, from wood and other fibers that they gather with their powerful jaws. Using their mandibles, they chew up the fibers into a pulp, adding saliva for glue, and begin to construct a cup-like structure in which they lay a single egg. Adding new structures next to and attached to the first, eventually they will have developed the honeycomb unit with which we are familiar. These colonial houses can be made above or below ground. The eggs hatch into grub-like larvae that the female must feed. The larvae must be given a meat diet, consisting mostly of insect larvae the female kills, bits of dead animals, and hamburgers and hot dogs from our picnic tables.

A trick to keep the vespids away from our picnics is to sacrifice some raw hamburger or a half wiener, placing it away from the picnic activities and letting the hornets have their way with it.

Eventually the wasp larvae reach their full size and they then spin a cocoon inside their individual honeycomb cups. Inside the cocoon they pupate and eventually turn into an adult wasp. Emerging from the cocoons, the new wasps assist their mother to build more cells on the nest and expand the colony. A full sized colony might have several hundred individuals by the end of summer.

As fall approaches, male wasps are to be found. They develop from unfertilized eggs that the queen wasp lays. She can control whether an egg is fertilized or not. The males mate with females and then are expelled from the colony by the female workers. Sort of Amazonian, don't you think? The fertilized females eventually leave the colony and seek out a place to hibernate for the winter.

The worker wasps die off with the onset of cold weather. Winter comes, followed by spring, and the process of forming a colony by the fertilized females starts all over again.

So, what's in a name? Maybe we should just call the group "Vespids". Vespa is Latin for wasp. Some of you might recall the Italian motor scooter, called a Vespa, which was made popular in the movie "American Graffiti". I think they probably named the scooter "Vespa" because the sound it made when running was sort of like the buzzing of a wasp. At any rate, have a nice rest of the summer and don't forget to share your picnics with our vespid friends!

