

What's the Buzz?

It won't be too long before the overwintering reproductive females of colonial wasps will be emerging from their winter sleep and start to begin new colonies. Wasps belong to the same order (Hymenoptera) as bees and ants. Actually, the term "wasp" is often used interchangeably with the term "hornet". The main thing we think about no matter which term is used is their ability to sting many times if we come in contact with them. Unlike bees, hornets do not have a barbed stinger that can be used only once, so an individual can inflict many stings into our bodies before their bad tempers are satisfied.

One of the things that brings wasps frequently in contact with people is their propensity to feed on both plant and animal tissue. We all can remember an outing or picnic where the hornets smell the food and want a share for themselves. The barbecue seems to be a great enticer for these creatures. When not interfering with our social gatherings or searching out prey, wasps very frequently feed on nectar from flowers.

Most wasps are social insects, although some species are solitary in habit. Of these, the so-called 2 inch "tarantula hawk" of the south-west searches out adult tarantulas as hosts for its young. When it finds one, a battle ensues and the "hawk" stings the spider to paralyze it. The wasp then drags the tarantula to a suitable site, digs a hole and stuffs the spider inside. A single egg is laid on the spider, which then serves as live food for the larva that hatches out. When the larva is full grown, it pupates and eventually becomes a new "hawk". The social species of wasps build colonies that house many workers and one or more queen females. A colony must have a nest that will serve as a nursery for developing larvae. These immatures are slug-like with no legs or ability to move about freely. They are housed in connected 6 sided cells in the nest consisting of chewed up wood fibers that are gathered by the workers. When a larva reaches a certain stage in development, it stops eating and forms a cocoon in which it transforms into an adult wasp. Then it takes its place in the society, gathering food and tending other larvae.

In the fall of the year, as winter approaches, the workers in the colony begin to die off until only a fertile queen is left to hibernate over the cold season and emerge in the spring to start the process of building a colony all over again.

Wasps are considered beneficials, as they clean up a great many dead animals and birds for their food during the summer, and also act as pollinating agents when they visit flowers for nectar. But please, please, stay away from my picnic table this summer! It would be greatly appreciated!

