

Beekeepers on alert for deadly hornets

Devon's beekeepers are being asked to watch out for sightings of the deadly Asian Hornet.



The hornet, or *vespa velutina*, is an invasive species which preys on honeybees and can decimate colonies. It first arrived in the UK from France in 2004, possibly in a consignment of pottery from China, and poses a constant threat to hives in this country.

Martin Hann, a former inspector with the National Bee Unit who now works in the Bee Department at Buckfast Abbey, says there have been a number of incursions of Asian Hornets over the past four years: "The South West region has seen the greatest influx of hornets, possibly as a result of high levels of traffic, because queen hornets can hitch a lift on vehicles such as camper vans and lorries, to and from the continent. Each incursion has been successfully dealt with and there have been no new sightings in Devon so far this year, but it's important to remain vigilant."

Martin says the hornets are deadly for two reasons – their eating habits and the size of their nests: "Asian Hornets eat adult honey bees and although they do eat other insects, research shows that up to 66% of their diet is bees.

"Secondly, Asian Hornets build very large nests which contain several hundred or even a thousand or so individuals. When you couple this with fact that beekeepers keep large boxes of bees (hives) with several on one site, then to a group of marauding Asian Hornets, a beekeeper's apiary begins to resemble a 24-hour fast food establishment, and they will plunder it mercilessly until they have wiped out the colony down to the last bee."

Martin says the insects have a distinctive appearance: "Asian hornets are slightly smaller than their European cousin and are

predominantly black or very dark brown except for an orange coloured face and a broad orange band on the abdomen close to the tail. The top half of its legs are dark brown, and the bottom halves are yellow, hence its other name, the yellow-legged hornet.

'Another way to differentiate between the two is the time of day that they are seen. Asian hornets only fly in full daylight while the European variety will fly at dusk.'

Many beekeepers feel that it is right to put out traps to catch Asian Hornets. However, Martin says this is a contentious issue because the traps can indiscriminately catch other beneficial pollinating insects. "There is a case for using traps once the hornets are known to be in the area, but until then they may do more harm than good. I am proud to say that I worked for the National Bee Unit as a seasonal bee inspector for six years. We had the advantage of seeing what had happened in France and knew that we had to be ready, not so much if, but when, the first hornets arrived."

Beekeepers were also quick to see the threat. "Some of them travelled to the Channel Islands to get first-hand experience and then mobilised themselves into Asian Hornet Action Teams (AHAT's for short). These are teams of beekeepers spread across the country who are able to respond to potential sightings, help with positive identification and begin to actively note where the hornets are foraging."

Martin says the National Bee Unit has become adept at dealing with Asian Hornet sightings, but it can only act if sightings are reported – and extreme caution is needed.

"The Asian Hornet is a stinging insect but while they are foraging, they are normally no more of a nuisance than a wasp. It is known however, that the hornets are very defensive of their nest. Hornets have 3mm long stingers which they can use multiple times to inject a very potent venom.

'Not only that, the venom releases a chemical to encourage other hornets to come and sting at the same site. They can cause not only very painful swelling, worse than that of a bee or a wasp, but also potentially life-threatening anaphylactic shock if you are allergic to the toxin. If you were unlucky enough to be stung it would be wise to seek medical help, just in case.



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'So, the message is clear, if you think you have seen an Asian Hornet then please report it through the appropriate channels but do not go searching for the nest, leave that to the professionals.'

If you suspect you have spotted an Asian Hornet, you can report it to the National Bee Unit direct, or by visiting the BBKA website to find details of your local Asian Hornet Action Team. An Asian Hornet app is also available.

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