

Backcountry Horsemen of California



What's the BUZZ???



So what is that buzz or hum of wings? Is it a bee or wasp? What is it doing? Where is it going?

Could it be a danger to me or my animals?

One thing we know: a small, flying speck of life, can certainly pack a powerful punch!

Bees and wasps can be a serious nuisance problem especially in the late summer when the populations are high and the food source is low. In the balance of nature, however, these insects are beneficial in their activities, particularly as pollinators and predators of pest insects. Bees sustain themselves on nectar or pollen. Wasps develop by feeding primarily on insects, and in the late season are drawn to human food and garbage. There are honey bees, bumble bees, carpenter bees, mining bees, sweat bees, leaf cutter bees and parasite bees. There are hornets, paper wasps, yellow jackets “meat bees”, cicada killer wasps, spider wasps, and parasite wasps.

The yellow jacket, commonly known as “meat bee” is attributed to most of the “bee stings” in mountainous areas. According to entomologist George Poinar, “one sting is enough to kill a hypersensitive human and 50 to 75 stings is enough to kill a normal human.” Weather is a factor with yellow jacket populations. A mild winter in the mountains allows more queens to survive and set up new nests in the spring. Fall is when the workers become more assertive in their quest to obtain protein to stock the queen’s winter nest. Anything that resembles meat or sugar is what the workers want and will be aggressive to take to the nest. They tend to defend their nests vigorously when disturbed. Their mandibles are how they bite and can take a piece of your flesh, but the venom is contained in the stinger and they can sting repeatedly. Their nests are similar to paper wasps, building paper cylinders from chewed organic materials and using sticky saliva to mold the cylinders together in organized cells. Nests can usually be found in the ground or at ground level in fallen logs, tree stumps, rodent tunnels and natural cavities along meadow edges, trails, etc.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES: Forget the perfume and fragrances while in the wilderness. Wear light or natural colored clothing. Flowers are bright and you don’t want to attract bees. Insect repellent may help.

IN CAMP: Keep your camp CLEAN. Minimize your trash/garbage and keep it sealed. Keep all food covered. Traps may help to lure meat bees away from the camp. Meat bees seem to like meat and fruits best. The use of spray is best done in the early morning or at night when it is cooler. Meat bees do not move as fast and your chances of getting stung are reduced. Those mosquito net tents are very nice and light weight to pack.

ON THE TRAIL: Be alert! You must be aware of your surroundings and what is happening at all times. Be certain your group knows the plan of action should you encounter an aggressive hive. Watch for that little flying flicker of activity that is either coming or going from a hole in the ground, rotten wood or natural cavities that you and your animals must go past. Watch the animal in front of you. Does he drop his head to get something off his nose? Aggressively swish his tail and stomp his feet? You had better not miss these warning signs! If you believe you are among the stinging critters: give a loud holler “bees” and have everyone pick up a trot and move through the area. (A lope is a greater danger to everyone and harder to control the situation). Continue to trot until the entire group is at a safe distance from the nest. Check for any stings on both humans and animals. Take appropriate measures for first-aid treatment.



FIRST AID MEASURES

Honey bees—but not other bees or wasps—generally leave the stinger embedded in the skin. Remove the stinger as soon as possible. Honey bee stingers are best removed by scraping (not crushing) the stinger with a finger nail or knife blade. Wasps do not leave a stinger but instead can bite several times.

Localized swelling and pain are typical reactions. In most people, these symptoms will gradually disappear. Wash the area with soapy water or alcohol. Apply antiseptic to area to help prevent possible infection. Cool lotions or compresses can help relieve pain and swelling. Various materials applied to site may also reduce pain such as: crushed aspirin, a paste made of baking soda or meat tenderizer. If multiple stings are received oral antihistamines can be helpful.

A small percentage of humans are hypersensitive to stings. A systemic allergic reaction can involve difficulty in breathing, dizziness, nausea, and development of hives. These symptoms may require immediate medical attention from a physician. Most hypersensitive individuals carry an injectable antidote and know how to administer the medicine. They should be evacuated immediately.

Name	Nest/Location	Colony Permanence & Size	Food Habits	Stinger
Honey Bee	wax comb loc: large hollows, hives	perennial > 10,000	nectar, pollen sweet foods	barbed left during sting
Bumble Bee	wax comb loc: rodent burrows, small hollow spaces with lots of insulated debris	annually 50–500	nectar, pollen	no barb
Paper Wasp	paper comb, no envelope loc: under eaves in small voids	annually < 100	live insects	no barb
Yellow Jacket “Meat Bee”	paper comb, covered with paper envelope loc: usually underground	annually 100’s	dead insects garbage, meats, sweet foods	no barb
Hornet	paper comb, covered with paper envelope loc: above ground in trees, shrubs and under eaves	annually 100’s	live insects	no barb

LURE TRAPS: Available at many retail stores. These are easy to use. Best used to catch the queen in late winter and spring. They may help reduce but not eliminate large populations. Change the bait every 2-4 weeks and more often when temperature is high.

WATER TRAPS: Generally homemade and consist of a 5 gallon bucket, string and protein bait such as turkey, ham or fish. (Do not use cat food). The bucket is filled with soapy water and the protein bait is suspended 1-2 inches above the water. (The use of a wide mesh screen over the bucket will prevent other animals from taking the bait). After the yellow jacket takes the protein, it flies down and becomes trapped in the water and drowns. Place the traps away from your eating area.

NEST SPRAYS: Aerosol formulations of insecticides which are labeled for wasps and hornets and must be used with extreme caution. Wasps will attack when sensing a poison applied to their nests. Always wear protective clothing. Underground nests can be quite a distance from the visual entrance and the spray may not reach far enough to hit the wasps. Partially intoxicated, agitated wasps can still be stinging you at some distance from the nest.

The content of this written material has been officially approved for distribution by Backcountry Horsemen of California
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