Is it Really a "Sweat Bee"?

Soni Cochran
Extension Associate

"Don't worry about those. They're just sweat bees. They won't hurt you. Just ignore them and eat your hamburger." How many parents have said that to children gathered at the picnic table for a fall outing? My parents did and it worked (even though I'm sure my parents knew what those yellow and black critters really were). As a result, my six brothers and sisters and I learned to ignore the pesky "sweat bees" crawling across our paper plates, just shooed them out of our drink cups and avoided them at the trash cans in the park.

It wasn't until much later in life that I learned those "sweat bees" weren't really that at all — they were yellowjackets. How could this be? Yellowjackets are known for their aggressive behavior and ability to sting multiple times if we accidentally stumble across a nest. These critters ignored us at the picnic table.

Fortunately, the yellowjackets who join us for a picnic lunch are only after our food — especially during late summer and fall. Your fruit salad, ice cream, soda pop, jelly and meat products are definitely on the menu. Since the yellowjackets are not near their nest and protecting it, they are not aggressive.

If you are planning an outdoor event and encounter yellowjackets (this is likely in late summer and fall), it is a good idea to be prepared:

- In areas where yellowjackets are active, do not leave food in open containers.
- Place food scraps in sealed trash containers away from your picnic table.
- Cover aluminum beverage cans or serve beverages in "insect-proof" containers with lids and straws. A yellowjacket can easily crawl into an aluminum beverage can when you aren't looking. And yes, the wasp will sting you if you accidentally swallow it. (Note: studies have shown that yellowjackets are especially fond of Mountain Dew®.)
- Avoid wearing brightly colored clothing.
- Do not wear highly scented cosmetic products like perfume, cologne or hair spray.
- Avoid scented suntan lotions (but do wear sun screen!)
- Children should keep their faces and hands washed — especially after eating foods that are attractive to yellowjackets. Clean up any spills on clothing.
- When yellowjackets appear at your picnic, it is best to stay calm, cover food or just remove yourself from the area if they become a nuisance.

Yellowjackets and other wasp are beneficial insects. They prey on many insects we think of as pests. If you have a nest on your property and it is not located near an area where people or pets frequent, consider leaving it alone. Unlike honey bees, yellowjackets are short-lived and die in late fall/early winter. If you need to take steps to control the nest, make sure you pick up NebGuide "Stinging Wasp and Bees" (G1447) from the extension office. Or view it online at lancaster.unl.edu/enviro/pest/bees.htm. Review this publication thoroughly before attempting any controls.

Proper planning can prevent most potential problems with yellowjackets and make your afternoon at a football game, picnic or family outing a bit more enjoyable.

WEST NILE VIRUS NEWS

West Nile Virus Alert!

Nebraskans must continue to reduce exposure to mosquitoes until first frost to avoid contracting the West Nile virus. Even as summer winds down, West Nile cases continue to increase across the state.

It is especially important now because in late summer, *Culex* mosquitos which transmit the disease, make up a growing proportion of the total mosquito population.

In some western Nebraska counties, as many as 50 to 60 percent of *Culex* mosquitos carry West Nile, while in Lancaster County, about 11 percent of *Culex* mosquitos carries the virus.

In 2002, Nebraska had 174 human cases and eight deaths from West Nile virus.

Make sure you drain standing water after it rains, clean eaves and gutters and look for objects that can trap and hold water that can result in mosquito breeding.

Flush bird baths often and fill them with clean water. Ponds in yards and gardens should re-circulate water so they are not still.

Avoiding mosquito bites will reduce exposure to the virus. Avoid working outdoors in the early evening and early morning hours when mosquitoes are most active. Farmers should look carefully at their irrigation practices to make sure runoff and seepage from fields is minimal.

If working outdoors in the evening, wear long pants and long sleeves. DEET repellents can be used and should be applied on the outside of clothing or on exposed skin. People sensitive to DEET can use an alternative product such as citronella, but DEET is more effective.

A product with a concentration of 30 percent DEET should provide about six hours of protection per application, 15 percent DEET provides five hours, 10 percent provides three hours and five percent provides two hours.

Source: Dave Keith, UNL Entomologist (BPO)

West Nile Virus Q &A

Q. What are the symptoms of West Nile virus infection?

A. Most people who are infected with the West Nile virus will not have any type of illness. It is estimated that 20 percent of the people who become infected will develop West Nile fever: mild symptoms, including fever, headache and body aches, occasionally with a skin rash on the trunk of the body and swollen lymph glands. The symptoms of severe infection (West Nile encephalitis or meningitis) include headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness and paralysis. It is estimated that one in 150 persons infected with the West Nile virus will develop a more severe form of the disease.

Q. What is the incubation period in humans (i.e., time from infection to onset of disease symptoms) for West Nile encephalitis?

A. Usually 3 to 14 days.

Q. How long do symptoms last?

A. Symptoms of mild disease will generally last a few days. Symptoms of severe disease may last several weeks, although neurological effects may be permanent.

Source: Centers for Disease Control (BPO)

Odd Insects Found in Late Summer

Barb Ogg
Extension Educator
and
Soni Cochran
Extension Associate

Many insects become adults in the late summer or early fall. Here are some of the more interesting insects you may see in your own backyard.

Velvet Ants (a.k.a Cow Killers)

An unusual insect reported in Lancaster County yards during late summer and early fall is the velvet ant. The females are wingless and are sometimes mistaken for a large, hairy, orange and black ant. These "ants" are actually wasps! A solitary wasp, the velvet ant does not live in colonies or have a "nest". You may find it crawling through lawns, digging around soil or even in garages where they have wandered in by accident.

Velvet ants are not aggressive and will try to escape from you. The females have a very painful sting if handled. The name "Cow Killer Ant" was given to the velvet ant because the female's sting was reputed to be so painful that it could kill a cow. This handsome insect does make a sound (especially when stepped on) but the squeaks of the velvet ant would hardly be heard over the painful screams, if the person stepping on the wasp was barefoot.

The adult velvet ants feed on nectar and water. The immature stages are external parasites of bees and wasps that nest in the ground like bumblebees and cicada killer wasps. The adult female velvet ant crawls into the bee's nest and lays eggs inside the nest. Velvet ant eggs hatch into larvae that feed on bee larvae and pupae. The velvet ant pupates inside the bee's nest where it will emerge the next season.

Velvet ants do not cause damage and no chemical controls are need. Velvet ants should be left alone, but if control is desired, make sure you have on a heavy-soled shoe before stepping on the insect!

Wheel Bug

The wheel bug is 1-1/4 inch long and found on trees and shrubs during the late summer and early fall. Its common name comes from the wheel-shaped projection behind the head. People who see this insect for the first time, are often alarmed because of its large size and bizarre appearance.

It is a dreaded foe of other insects. Wheel bugs spear their unfortunate prey with its needle-like beak and sucks up the victim's body fluids. They are especially fond of caterpillars.

Wheel bug females lay eggs on twigs of shrubs and trees in the fall. In the early spring, eggs hatch and you may see these small red insects with long legs on various trees or landscape plants. Like the adult, immature stages prey on other insects.

Wheel bugs are beneficial insects and should be considered valuable allies. When disturbed, they can inflict a painful and lasting "bite" with their beak. It is best to leave this insect alone.

Preying Mantis

Many people recognize the preying mantis as being a voracious predator of the insect world. Mantids are well adapted to predation. Different species may be green or brown — usually camouflaged to resemble their background. They have large eyes and excellent eyesight to see prey. A preying mantid's front legs are highly modified with sharp spines, used to capture and hold its prey. The reaction of these legs is so fast that they can catch a fly in flight as it tries to escape.

Because autumn is the time of mating for mantids in Nebraska (and other temperate climates), this is when you will find adults. The male mantid is usually smaller than the female and will be very cautious in approaching a potential partner, or he will end up as a meal rather than a mate. Any mantis will eat another mantis if it gets a chance, and mating females are no exception to this rule.

Even after a male mantis has mated with a female, he is not safe from her tremendous appetite. Females often seize their partners and devour them as soon as they have finished mating. In fact, they sometimes attack the males during the mating act.

Mantis females usually deposit their eggs in a foamy mass which hardens on vegetation or structures. In the spring, eggs hatch and immature mantids scatter quickly to find prey and avoid their cannibalistic siblings. Purchasing mantid egg masses seems like a good method of biological control, but keeping young mantids in the garden isn't as easy as it seems. Their cannibalistic nature helps keep densities low.

Mole Crickets

Mole crickets are so grotesque in appearance that people are curious about this insect when they find it.

Adult mole crickets are 1 to 1-1/4 inches long with grayish-brown, velvety bodies and large, beady eyes. They get their name from the fact that they have broad, spade-like front legs that are well adapted to digging tunnels in the soil. Adult mole crickets have wings and, considering their size, are surprisingly good fliers. Immature mole crickets (nymphs) resemble the adults except they are smaller and lack fully developed wings.

Mole crickets deposit their eggs in chambers hollowed out in the soil. The young nymphs escape from the egg chamber and burrow to the soil surface.

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