



# YELLOWJACKETS

**W**ith their potent sting, yellowjackets can be menacing creatures when it comes to a showdown over the picnic table. In years when the spring is warm and dry, yellowjacket populations can increase to the point of making outdoor activities difficult. But few people are aware that yellowjackets are voracious predators of insect pests such as caterpillars and flies.

## Identification

Yellowjackets are a type of predatory wasp, but they are often mistaken for bees or confused with other less aggressive predatory wasps, such as paper wasps. Yellowjackets are short and stout, while paper wasps are slender, with long, dangling legs. Bees, in general, are more hairy and do not have an obvious, narrow 'wasp waist.'

## What You Can Do

### Remove Yellowjackets from Inside the House

- Do not aggravate a yellowjacket by swatting at it.
- Do not squash a yellowjacket. When crushed, many yellowjacket species emit a chemical that can cause other nearby yellowjackets to attack.
- Wait until the yellowjacket lands on a flat surface.
- Place a glass or plastic container over the insect and slide a stiff piece of paper under the container opening.
- Seal the container and place it in the freezer overnight or take it outside and release the wasp.

If you are finding many yellowjackets inside, you may have a nest in a wall void.

### Destroy Nests

- Because of the danger of multiple stings, we recommend calling a professional who has experience working with bees and wasps.
- Yellowjackets build nests in abandoned rodent burrows and other holes in the ground, in attics, in wall voids, in shrubs and trees. Sometimes they hang their nests from the eaves of buildings.

### Trap Yellowjackets

Traps can provide temporary relief from yellowjackets when you plan to eat outdoors, but don't leave traps out for more than a few days at a time because yellowjackets can learn to escape. There are a number of traps on the market, some disposable and others reusable. Experiment to find the trap or traps that work best for you.

- Place a number of the traps around the periphery of your yard or picnic area to lure the wasps away from your activities and food.
- To make trapping more effective, set the traps out well before outdoor activities begin.
- If a trap in one location is not attracting wasps, move it.
- If none of the traps attracts yellowjackets even though the wasps are present, try changing the bait. (Use baits such as tuna-flavored cat food in the spring and early summer. Try using grenadine, apple juice, or the attractants that come with the traps in late summer and fall.)
- Wasps caught in reusable traps can be killed by submerging the traps in a pail of soapy water, or putting the traps in a plastic bag and setting them in the sun.

### Poison Baiting

As a last resort in years when yellowjacket populations are extremely high, poison baiting may be necessary. Call a pest control professional.

## Prevention

- Seal holes and cracks in foundations, walls, roofs, and eaves to prevent yellowjackets from entering your home.
- Cover attic and crawl space vents with fine mesh insect screen.
- Yellowjackets scavenge for meat and sweet foods and drinks in outdoor garbage and recycling bins. Clean recyclables before storing them. Keep garbage cans clean and tightly covered or seal all food garbage in plastic bags.

## Why Yellowjackets Sting

Yellowjackets seldom sting when they are foraging for food, unless they feel threatened. They are most likely to sting when their nests are disturbed by a direct blow or by vibrations that are detected by the wasps inside. Mowing the lawn near an underground nest, construction work near a nest in a wall void, or even merely walking near a nest can provoke an attack by one or more yellowjackets. This is especially true if the nest has been disturbed before.

## Avoiding Stings

### When a wasp approaches:

- Remain calm.
- *Do not* strike at a yellowjacket with sharp, sudden blows. Slow, gentle movements that mimic the movement of a

branch in the breeze will be safer in encouraging the wasp to leave.

- Brush yellowjackets off with a piece of paper or some other object. Be sure to move slowly and deliberately.

During yellowjacket season, the following tips will help prevent stings. Yellowjackets can be a problem in May and June, but they are most noticeable and annoying late in the summer.

- Wear protective clothing when mowing grass where you suspect underground nests.
- If you are hypersensitive to yellowjacket stings, avoid outdoor cooking or eating. Wear clothing that covers as much skin as possible, and carry an epinephrine kit (available by prescription) at all times.
- Do not drink soft drinks or other sugary drinks from open containers. Use cups with lids and straws, and look before you sip. Do not carry snacks containing meat or sugar in open containers.
- Do not wear perfumes. Use unscented deodorant, sun screen, hair spray, etc.
- Wear light-colored clothing without patterns.
- Avoid going barefoot, especially in vegetation.
- Always examine wet towels or wet clothing before handling them.

## Products

Rescue!<sup>®</sup> Yellowjacket Trap (disposable)

Rescue!<sup>®</sup> Trap (reusable)

Surefire<sup>®</sup> Deluxe Yellowjacket and Wasp Trap

Victor<sup>®</sup> Yellowjacket and Flying Insect Trap

*Note:* New products are constantly coming to the market. Brand names listed are for example only. No endorsement of specific products is intended nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned. Always use according to directions on product label.

## For More Information

If you have questions about the information in this fact sheet, contact the Marin County Department of Agriculture at 415-499-6700, or the Bio-Integral Resource Center, PO Box 7414, Berkeley, CA 94707; 510-524-2567.