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It's a freak of nature that has baffled Extension entomologists: What accounts for all of these super-sized yellow jacket nests cropping up all over the state?

Until recently, an insect expert could go an entire career without seeing more than a couple of yellow jacket nests larger than a basketball. This year alone, they've turned up 16. In fact, the sizes of some of these super-sized nests almost defy description.

Dr. Charles Ray, an Auburn University researcher who works part-time for Extension, says the largest nest he's personally seen so far filled the interior of a weathered 1955 Chevrolet parked under a shed in Elmore County ---- "and that's when they drove large vehicles".

One nest encountered in an abandoned barn in Pike County was roughly the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. Equally astonishing is the size of these nests. A typical nest contains between two and three thousand workers and one queen. The super-sized nests may contain as many as 100,000. One mammoth nest discovered in South Carolina contained roughly a quarter-million workers and as many as 100 queens.

Ray fears some of these nests may not even reach maximum size until late July or August. One other finding has intrigued Ray and other researchers: the presence of satellite nests in close proximity to the large nest. No one is sure why these smaller satellite nests occur, though Ray thinks they may be prompted by space limitations in the large nests.

One thing is certain: The presence of these super-sized nests throughout the state presents a potentially serious human threat, especially later in the season. Anyone encountering one of these nests should not attempt to treat them with a can of bug spray. As Ray stresses, without the right kind of equipment, they're just too big to get enough pesticide material in them. Contact a certified pest control operator instead.

Ray also encourages homeowners and others who encounter one of these super-sized nests to contact their local Extension office before treating it. He and his fellow researcher, Dr. Xing Ping Hu, an Extension entomologist and Auburn University associate professor of entomology and plant pathology, are trying to collect as much data as they can from these nests to gain a clearer picture of what is causing them and how they're best treated.

For now, Ray and fellow entomologists can only hazard a guess as to the causes behind this freak of nature. They speculate this year's unusually mild winter was the main culprit.

This raises another question: Could global warming play a role? For now, Ray says, that's only wild speculation. Still, it's a premise that can't be overlooked --- or as Ray explains, "It's not beyond the realm of possibility." If this is true, and the result is milder winters for the foreseeable future, Ray says super-sized yellow jacket nests conceivably could become a perennial problem.

For most of us, hopefully at least, we can avoid these large "super nests". Typically the nests are located in the ground and are a more manageable size. Locate the nest area during the daytime (hopefully you can do this without the lawn mower or string trimmer like I usually manage to find them). You should plan to treat the nest after nightfall using a dust formulation of carbaryl or permethrin or one of the many other insecticides labeled for controlling yellowjackets. You can also use a liquid version of one of these insecticides. Plan to use at least a gallon of liquid (mixed according to labeled directions) to drench the mound area. One word of caution if you use a liquid product..... be careful.....very careful!

Yellow jackets are attracted to both sugary products as well as proteins (meats and sweets as I usually say). Eliminate any outdoor trash cans, dumpsters, or other similar areas in sensitive places such as schools, daycares, churches, etc.

Wasps are another familiar summertime bee pest. Their familiar nests can usually be seen hanging upside down from the eaves of houses and buildings, decks, boat docks, and storage areas.

These nests are much more visible (except for the one that got me the other day) and are usually much easier to treat than are the ground nesting bees such as yellowjackets and bumblebees. Any of the pressurized aerosol wasp and hornet sprays should do a good job eliminating the occasional wasp nest.

Regardless of what kind of problem bees you are trying to control, it is advisable to wear protective clothing such as a long sleeved shirt, long

pants, and a broad brimmed hat with face protection. Just one unsuccessful attempt at treating a yellowjacket or wasp nest will reinforce the importance of protective clothing. Night time is also the best time to treat nests since bees are much less active at night than during the daytime.