

News Article

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### Super Yellow Jackets Vanish

There are certain phenomenon that you only see on rare occasions, a shooting star, a solar eclipse, a rare flower, a bald eagle, and so forth. Last year we witnessed one of these rare events - the year of the super yellow jacket nests. Three of these nests were found in Coosa County, but many more were reported across the southern half of the state.

The phenomenon began early last summer when 16 super-sized yellow jacket nests were found throughout central and south Alabama. By the end of the summer, the number of reported nests increased to more than 80. Auburn University research entomologist, Dr. Charles Ray speculates there probably were hundreds more undetected nests throughout the state. Ten of these nests were found in Lowndes County, while an Extension agent in Covington County reported as many as 25 nests.

This year, though, the nests seem to have vanished as quickly as dissipating clouds. Working closely with Alabama Extension agents and other monitors throughout the state, Dr. Ray hasn't turned up so much as one nest this year. "The summer of 2006 may prove to be a once in a lifetime opportunity," says Dr. Ray, who considers the discovery of the nests one of the high points of his career.

So what accounts for this once in a lifetime occurrence? Dr. Ray speculates it had to do with an unusually mild 2006 winter. "The mid-20s was about as cold as it got that year — only about a day or two of really cold weather," says Dr. Ray, adding that this extremely mild winter probably established optimal conditions for the yellow jackets the following spring.

The most recent winter, though, started off with a bang with temperatures plummeting into the teens in early December. Dr. Ray believes this unusually early cold snap accounts for why these super-sized nests weren't turned up at all in 2007.

While we can only speculate, the presence of these super-sized nests may teach a valuable lesson about global climate change, if such a phenomenon is occurring. If we had extremely mild winters on a consistent basis we possibly could see these super-sized wasps nests much more frequently.

Despite this year's dramatic change, we are still trying to learn all we can about the nests and encourage homeowners and others who encounter one of these nests to contact their local Extension office before treating it. Dr. Ray and fellow researchers still want to collect data from any nests that may turn up in the future to gain a clearer picture of what is causing them and how they are best treated. Anyone who finds a suspicious nest is encouraged to contact the Coosa County Extension Office at 377-4713.