

Africanized Honey Bees

In October 1990, the first swarm of Africanized honey bees to move naturally from Mexico into the United States was found and destroyed in southern Texas. Since then, Africanized honey bees have been moving gradually toward Alabama.

It is impossible to predict exactly when or where Africanized honey bees will enter Alabama. However, traps for these bees are located around the state, so the public will be informed when they arrive. If they do get to Alabama, they are most likely to enter the southern coastal counties first. Although these bees do not bring widespread chaos and destruction, dramatic and widely publicized stinging incidents sometimes occur.

Honey Bee History

To understand Africanized honey bees, it is important to know that honey bees are not native to North, Central, or South America. Most honey bees in the United States are descendants from colonies brought to North America by European settlers beginning in the 1600s.

Unlike many of the insects brought by the settlers, which became serious pests, European honey bees became one of the most economically beneficial insects in the New World. Honey, beeswax, and bee pollination of many important agricultural crops contributes billions of dollars to the United States econo-

my each year. European honey bees performed well in regions of North America with climates similar to regions of Europe, but they did not perform well in tropical South America.

In 1956, researchers imported honey bees from Africa to Brazil in an effort to produce a honey bee better suited to the South American tropics. They were successful. The African honey bees adapted well to South America and began to either displace or mix with European honey bees (hence the name "Africanized" honey bees), spreading northward at a rate of about 200 to 300 miles per year. Unfortunately, Africanized honey bees have some undesirable traits.

Comparison Of Africanized And European Honey Bees

European honey bees and Africanized honey bees are identical in appearance. The sting from an Africanized honey bee is the same as that of a European honey bee. Both types of honey bees can be managed for honey production and pollination of plants.

Africanized honey bees, however, are more defensive. Large numbers may sting people, pets, and livestock if the bees feel that their colony is threatened. Because of this trait, the media started to call Africanized honey bees "killer bees."

Africanized honey bees also tend to swarm more often and to nest in open areas such as beneath tree limbs or unusual areas such as storage buildings, old tires, trash cans, and vacant underground animal nests. This behavior results in a great number of colonies, which increases the chance of human encounters. However, bees in these less-suitable nesting sites are more susceptible to freezing temperatures and chemical treatments.

Avoiding Africanized Honey Bees

Established Africanized honey bee colonies are often called "swarms." In reality, a true swarm is a dispersal stage, when the bees are moving to find a new nest. Swarming bees are not likely to sting because they have no nest to defend. Similarly, individual foraging bees pose no threat to non-allergic people. It is established colonies, where the bees are producing wax, honey, and young that may be a potential stinging threat.

In the future if Africanized honey bees become established in your area, you will need to be observant for their nests, just as you are observant for certain snakes or fire ants. Learn to recognize the honey bee. Do not climb a tree, disturb a stump, or move trash until you first check to see if bees are flying in and out. If you see any bees, no mat-

ter what type they are, simply avoid direct contact with them. Generally, if you leave them alone, they will leave you alone.

If you plan to be outside in a rural area where Africanized honey bees are known to occur, try to wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing. This clothing will not completely protect you from attack, but it can decrease the intensity of the attack. Since attacking bees often sting around the head, take head protection (such as a light-colored hat or large kerchief) with you on walks or hikes. You may also want to carry a repellent. Repellent sprays containing DEET have some effect against the bees when sprayed into the air around you, but they are not effective if sprayed on your skin.

If You Are Attacked

If you inadvertently provoke an attack, run. Never stand in one place or swat at the bees. The bees want you away from their nest, and it is best to oblige them. Try to run in a straight line while protecting your head. Run to a protected area, such as a car or building, or into the woods, where trees will help to confuse the bees. If available, use your repellent spray.

If you are with someone who is attacked and becomes disoriented, shout to the person and try to lead him or her on a



Fully protected beekeepers in an Africanized honey bee yard. Though necessary, protective clothing is very hot to wear.

course away from the area. If your friend falls or gets trapped, he or she will need help, but remember you will be risking your own safety. Cover your head and use your repellent spray as you approach your friend. If you can not pull him or her away from the area, cover your friend with anything you have, such as leaves, blankets, or clothes, until the bees stop their attack.

Most non-allergic individuals with few stings do not need special medical attention. However, if you have any concerns at all, you should see a doctor immediately following a stinging episode. Of course, allergic people should never work with honey bees, Africanized or European.



A nest of Africanized honey bees under a discarded tire. The nest was only a few feet away from an elementary school playground.

Who Can Help You

Alabama Regulatory Officials and Alabama Cooperative Extension System personnel will know if Africanized honey bees reach your area. Check with these agencies if you have questions. Control of Africanized honey bee colonies should be done only by trained pest control operators, beekeepers, or state officials.

Finally, it is important to know that beekeepers with European honey bees are probably your best defense against Africanized honey bees. Without beekeepers, the number of docile European honey bees in Alabama would decrease, leaving more areas for Africanized honey bees to infest. Beekeepers have the knowledge to help you and the resources to limit the adverse impact of Africanized honey bees.