



28 July 2015

*V. vulgaris*

WASPS AND HORNETS

In late summer, social wasps can be a nuisance, lurking around the hive entrance for opportunist entry to plunder the honey stores within and, even worse, to kill honey bees flying to and from the hive.

There are seven species of social wasps that frequently occur in the UK: *Vespula* species such as Common wasp (*V. vulgaris*) and Red wasp (*V. rufa*) usually make their nests underground or in dark cavities (such as roof spaces), while *Dolichovespula* species, such as Median wasp (*D. media*) and Saxon wasp (*D. saxonica*), build their nests in open-air situations on the outside of buildings or among tree branches. At up to 3.5cm long, the European hornet (*Vespa crabro*) is Britain's largest social wasp and seems to have become more common in recent years - although hornets can look alarming, they tend to be less aggressive than other wasps.

All female wasps and the related hornets have unbarbed stingers that enable them to sting several successive times.

To build their nests, wasps and hornets gather material by rasping fibres from dry wood, including fences and sheds, which when mixed with saliva make a paste which sets to form a paper-mache like nest - the honeycomb within is also delicately formed from this paper-mache. These nests last just one season, and in late Autumn only the Queens dispatch from the nest to overwinter under cover in a suitable crevice or similar. Whereas honeybees feed their larvae with nectar and pollen, wasps are mainly predatory feeding their grubs on invertebrates such as caterpillars and aphids and so are gardeners' allies in battling pests.



In late summer, wasp and hornet nests have passed their peak and there is less demand for animal protein in the nest. It is then that wasps seemingly with not much to do, loaf about seeking sugary substances. In gardens this is mostly a problem on soft-skinned fruit; picnickers have to swat their way through all manner of sweets and savouries, particularly sugary jam sandwiches; and marauding wasps are attracted to bee hives where they attempt entry to access and rob the honey stores within. A strong honeybee colony is able to resist wasp intrusion but where the colony is weak, fitting a mouse excluder renders the entrance area more defensible, hindering the pillage.

Presently in France and establishing itself in areas towards the Channel coast, is the honeybee eating Asian hornet (*V. velutina*). About the same size, it can be distinguished from the European hornet (*V. crabro*) by its single yellow abdominal band and distinctive yellow lower parts of its legs. Once established *V. velutina* is capable of killing and stealing off with 50 or more honeybees per day!



John Large