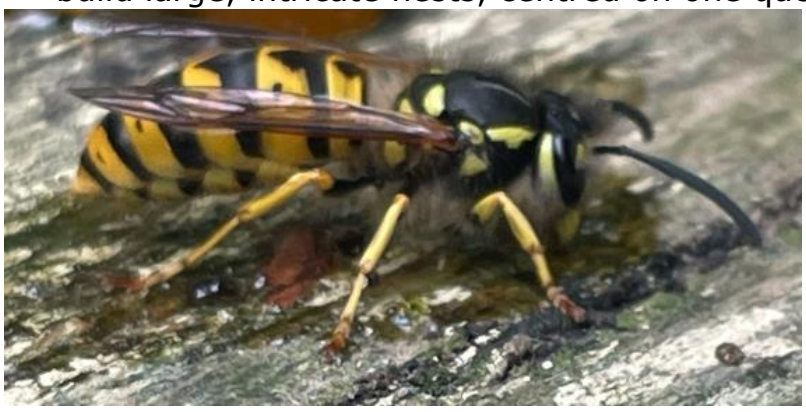
August: wasps

Wasps

It's probably a hopeless mission, but I want to try to convince you of the usefulness – and even beauty - of stripey, 'yellow jacket' wasps.
All yellow jackets, including the European hornet, are social wasps that build large, intricate nests, centred on one queen, born the previous year and having mated with several males. Only these new queens survive the winter, hidden away in attic nooks, tree holes or sometimes underground in a burrow, until, on a warm spring morning, they emerge.



These queens initially feed on nectar from flowers, doing a bit of pollinating as they go. As soon as she's found somewhere safe to found her colony, the queen starts chewing fragments of wood from which, mixed with saliva, she will construct her beautifully ornate papier-mâché nest. Now she can begin laying her first eggs, which soon hatch. The grubs are carnivorous, so she has to hunt for insects – particularly caterpillars and aphids - to feed them until they pupate. When the first new adults emerge, all female but a mixture of full and half-sisters, they take over building a bigger nest and hunting for food for the next batch of grubs, leaving the queen to concentrate on egg laying.

At its peak each nest contains a few hundred to several thousand wasps, depending on the species, with the workers divided into professions – hunters, guards, and builders. You may see gangs of worker wasps on trees or garden furniture, chewing off the wood to take home for the nest There might be squabbles among the sisters and sometimes even palace coups. Some workers might lay sneaky eggs – but as they are unfertilised they only hatch out as males.
The very narrow waists of adult wasps mean that they can't eat anything other than high sugar and protein liquid food, so in return for being fed insects, the grubs produce a nectar-like substance to feed their big sisters. Hence, if you're spring picnicking, any bothersome wasps will most likely be after meat rather than sweet things from your spread. By late summer

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and autumn, however, most of the grubs will be pupae and so no longer producing liquid food for their big sisters. Now you will find the adults after your sweet drinks and jam sandwiches. You can help with a survey of what wasps are eating when and where by filling out this online form.

The males – mainly around in late summer – do nothing (of course) except dawdle about drinking nectar from flowers, pollinating as they go, and, if they are lucky, mating with new queens in the autumn - then die. The males are docile and have longer droopy antennae. And (the stinger being a modified ovipositor –an egg-laying device – so lacking) they couldn't sting you even if they could be bothered to.

The two most common small wasps you can see in the churchyard and gardens at this time of year are common wasps and German wasps. If you look at them closely you can tell them apart by their faces; the common wasps have a teddy bear-like black anchor (above left), while the German wasps (right) have a broken anchor or even just three dots. The other small wasps you might see in more wooded areas are the tree wasp, which has just one facial dot, and red wasps - with a splodgy anchor face and a red tinge to the front of their abdomens. A bit larger and less common are the median wasps that have vertical stripes on their faces.

And if you're lucky you might find some hornets. An inch or more long. They have a fearsome reputation. '*And I will send hornets before thee, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite*' (Exodus 23:28) - God's shock troops for the ancient Israelite army.

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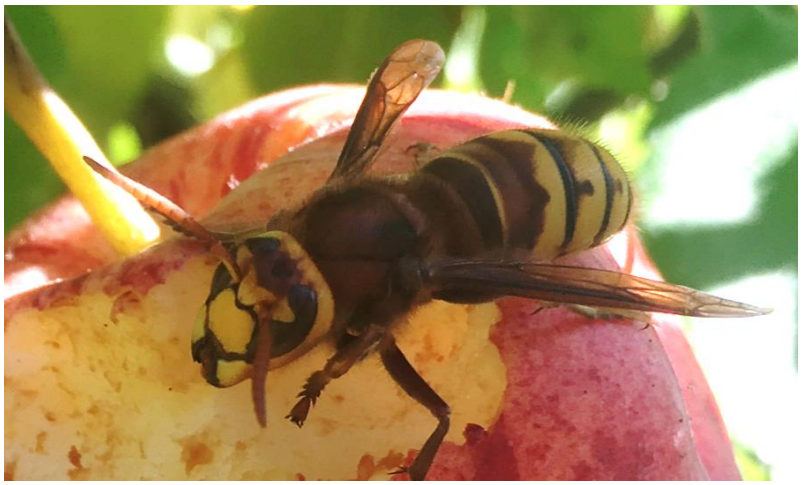
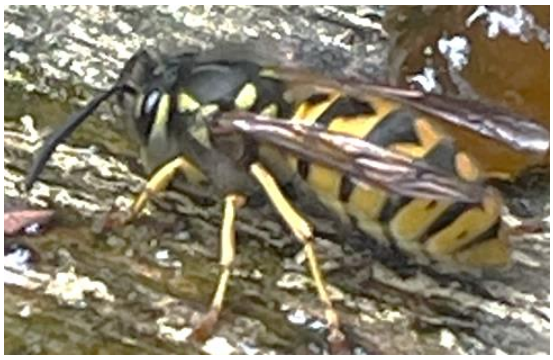


But in my experience, hornets are pretty friendly unless you bother them[1]. The one in this photo was part of a nest in my uncle's garden in Kent, and, as long as I didn't take away her apple, she was perfectly happy to be peered at from only a few inches away.

So – wasps are sociable, pollinate flowers and eat aphids and other garden pests. Yet we concentrate entirely on their stings. The key to not getting stung is tolerance and respect. Waving your arms about suggests you're a predator, and they will attack back. And dying wasps give off a chemical that attracts other wasps, so don't squish them either. Rather, if they join your picnic, watch what food they are after, put some on a separate dish and gradually move it away from you. Unlike bees, wasps rarely recruit sisters from the colony, so think of this as a small kindness to a small stranger rather than buying into a Mafia-style protection racket. Shouting loudly, 'go away!' doesn't help much, although neither, I suspect, did Ronald Blythe's chanting 'I come in peace' as he carefully removed his 'cherished hornets', one by one, from his spare bedroom.



If you do get stung then use something cold to reduce the pain and swelling, maybe take a painkiller (ibuprofen or paracetamol), and you should be fine. Perhaps an over-the-counter antihistamine. If worried ring NHS 111, and of course in rare cases of severe allergy (respiratory distress or collapse), ring 999.

By the way, the old idea of alkali for bee stings and acid (such a vinegar) for wasp stings doesn't work as wasp venom is nearly neutral and anyhow that's not the problem – the venom contains a cocktail of substances designed to paralyse their insect prey and cause maximum local pain to bigger animals like you.

[1] The Asian hornet is more of a problem – a non-native species, it's a ferocious hunter that attacks bees in their hives If you see one you need to inform Defra who will try to track it back to its nest and destroy the colony. They're a bit smaller than our European hornets, and rather than deep red and yellow look mostly black with yellow legs.