Bald-Faced Hornets

(*Dolichovespula maculata*)

Bald-faced hornet (Herndon, VA)

Gray paper nest in a tree

Nest exposed as leaves fall

Identification – Bald-faced hornets are about 5/8 to 3/4 inch long (queens are just over an inch) and mostly dark brown with pale, greenish-white markings. They get the name “bald-faced” from the broad pale patch on the front of the head. The giveaway is the nest, a gray, football- or egg-shaped paper ball that can reach basketball size by late summer, with the main entrance hole near the bottom. Don’t confuse them with the **European hornet**, a bigger brown-and-yellow insect that nests hidden in hollow trees, eaves and wall voids and often flies at night around porch lights.

Where they nest – Bald-faced hornets nest out in the open. Most nests hang from a tree branch, sometimes 60 feet or more up, or in a shrub. Some are built on a house, under the eaves or at the roof line, or on a shed or utility pole. Each spring, the queens that survived the winter start new nests, and by late summer a nest can hold a few hundred workers. Nests are easy to miss in a leafy tree until the leaves drop.

Why they’re a problem – Bald-faced hornets defend their nest hard, and like yellow jackets they can sting more than once. Trouble usually starts when someone bumps the branch, trims the shrub or mows under a low nest. Late in the season the colony is at its biggest and most easily stirred up.

What we find – A single hornet indoors usually just flew in by accident; they don’t live indoors. If a house had a nest at the roof line last year, it’s worth watching the same spot to make sure they aren’t rebuilding. In general, a nest higher than 15 to 20 feet poses little threat to people on the ground. Left alone, most of the nest, the majority of the nesting hornets, dies in the late fall. The future queens that survive overwinter in leaf clutter, hollow logs, or sometimes under siding and in homes, and the empty nest can then be safely removed.

What works – **Leave it alone if you can, treat it if you can’t.** A nest high in a tree away from the house can usually be left until frost; the nest isn’t reused next year. A nest on the house, by a door or deck, or low enough to be bumped is a different story. We handle nests within reach of our poles and ladder and remove the hornets when we can. Treating trees and shrubs out in the yard falls under landscape (lawn and ornamental) licensing, so we focus on the house and the area around it.

What you can do – Start by looking up. Check trees, shrubs and the roof line near doors, decks and play areas in early summer, while nests are still small. Keep people and pets away from the nest, and don’t mow, trim or use a ladder near it. Don’t knock it down, spray it with a hose or try to burn it, because that gets you stung. If the nest is out of the way, wait for a hard frost; the old nest can come down safely in winter.

When to call Dynamic – Give us a call if a nest is on or near the house, over a walkway or deck, or where kids play, if hornets keep showing up inside, or if anyone in the family is allergic. And if you’re not sure whether it’s a bald-faced hornet, a European hornet or a yellow jacket, send us a photo and we’ll identify it for you.