Wasps

by

*Eyes Right*

**Melbourne, KY -** Many of my childhood memories during our years on our farm here on the southern banks of the Ohio River involve wasps. I hated them, and apparently, the feeling was mutual. During summers, we were constantly at war. Each of us claimed victory in individual battles, but they ultimately outlasted me, as they have done with most other opponents for eons.

While there are multiple (at least 23) varieties of wasps in the U.S., my nemesis was the Dark Paper Wasp (sometimes called the Northern Paper Wasp). Their bodies are rather reddish-brown with characteristic yellow bands. On our farm, their favorite nesting areas were under eaves of the roofs of our garage and home. Their “homes” were easy to spot because they were gray and consisted of a cluster of thin, papery cylinders open at the bottom. These tubes are constructed in banks of varying diameters depending on how long the wasps have been adding to them throughout the summer. These nests are strictly one-summer affairs, abandoned in the fall. In retrospect, I sense an opening in the wasp ranks for some clever marketers to set up shop as realtors offering “slightly used nests.”

The queen wasp starts by selecting a good, protected location before collecting nearby weathered wood to chew on. Males are nowhere to be found, except in the eggs carried by the females from mating in late summer the previous year. The Queen uses her saliva to create a paste from the chewed-up wood. She then spits out this magic concoction to build a petiole on which she attaches a papery structure of hexagonal “paper” cells which end up looking like a honeycomb. Some of these structures contain 200 or more cells laden with eggs which have wintered over with the Queen and her princess friends. The eggs quickly become larvae in 5 to 8 days. It requires another 4 weeks for the larvae to emerge as adults and get to the business of feeding themselves (and stinging me). Almost all the wasps die when freezes arrive in the late fall, but a few hardy females find locations to make it through the winter to become spring queens.

I was told by many of our farmer neighbors not to bother the wasps because of all the “good” they do (killing and consuming caterpillars and other insects). The adults, I have learned, sting their prey (unlike bees, their stinger can be easily withdrawn with no harm to the wasp and used over and over), then chew up their victims and bring the solid parts back to older larvae and actually regurgitate the rest for younger larvae. The adults do not eat the insects themselves because they prefer sugar – in whatever form they can find it. Of course, the favorite source when around humans is a picnic site with lots of sugary beverages and treats. Absent of humans, they go after flower nectar and, in doing so, provide some level of pollination, but not quite as efficiently as bees.

None of this beneficial stuff was of any concern to me. Because I had been stung many times by wasps without any apparent provocation, my policy was total war. I never used chemicals on the wasps – I am not certain that such products existed in the 1950’s. My weapon of choice was a broomstick with a long handle. Upon finding a nest, often in an eave of the garage, I would stealthily approach with broom in hand, and try to take a quick swipe at the nest before one or more residents or their neighbors would violently object to my intrusion. It would be close to suicidal to hang around near the point of attack because that foolishness would almost always guarantee one or more stings. Basically, my plan was to swing at the nest and run like hell. Only later would I return to the scene of my crime to survey damage. If I had been successful at dislodging the paper house, I would take considerable joy in squishing its contents with my shoe.

Usually, I won more of these skirmishes than I lost, but over a typical summer, I probably received at least 5 stings – each of which was painful for a day or so. My parents never commented on this warfare – it was just boys being boys.

A decade later, the scornful acronym, WASP, came into popular usage to describe White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, which, at the time, were considered to be generally wealthy elitists. It had actually been first used in 1948, became popular in the 1960’s and 1970’s, but has since fallen out of usage. The real wasps, however, will probably outlast all of us. I still try to kill them on sight – it is tough to forgive those early stings.

I thought you might like to know.

E-R