



## Yellowjackets

*By Eric R. Day, Manager, Insect Identification Lab, Virginia Tech*

**DESCRIPTION:** Yellowjackets are from 5/8 to 1 inch (14-25.4mm) long, have black and yellow markings in a bold pattern. Since they are a type of wasp, they have a definite waist. They fold their wings lengthwise when at rest. Like all wasps, yellowjackets prey on a wide variety of insects and other arthropods. Yellowjackets are unusual in that workers also forage on foods consumed by people, especially sweets and meats.

**LIFE CYCLE:** In the fall, wasp colonies have attained their largest size, and in the vicinity of numerous colonies, foraging workers may become serious pests as they search for food—usually food that is eaten or discarded by people. Yellowjacket wasps are often pests in recreational areas in Virginia from late summer until early autumn.

**TYPE OF DAMAGE:** If a colony is disturbed, worker yellowjackets will aggressively defend their colony by stinging. May create a nuisance and life-threatening stinging episodes. For most of us a sting may be just a temporary painful experience, but for allergic individuals a single sting may result in a serious reaction.

**CONTROL:** Management of yellowjacket foragers: destruction of all yellowjackets in and around a recreational area is advised to reduce the possibility of a dangerous sting. Nests should be located during the day when the workers are going and coming on a regular basis; the location of the nest should be marked. Return late at night to treat the nest with a liquid or dust insecticide. The destruction of individual colonies may not eliminate all the yellowjacket workers from an area in which food is available. This is because yellowjackets are capable of flying a mile from their colonies in search of food.



Yellowjacket. David Cappaert, Michigan State University, Bugwood.org

Effective management of yellowjackets can be achieved by: (1) rigorous sanitation, and (2) use of physical exclusion from a food source. The principle behind these practices is the denial of attractive food to the foraging worker wasps. If begun early in the summer and carried out through mid-autumn, proper sanitation will help to reduce the buildup of foraging yellowjackets in an area. Trash containers should be kept closed (lid) whenever possible; open containers should be emptied regularly (every few hours when a large number of foragers are present). Use an aerosol insecticide to remove yellowjackets present around trashcans in order to empty them. Yellowjacket traps will catch some of the foraging workers but will not eliminate the problem.

The following measures are of no value in reducing the number of yellowjacket foragers in an area: (1) general spraying of an infested area, and (2) electrocuting devices employing UV light, i.e., bug zappers.

INTERESTING FACTS: Yellowjackets completely abandon their nests each fall, in the spring a single queen starts a nest in a new location.