

Bee aware: Look, listen, run:

Africanized bees in area, Seminar offers safety tips

By Charles M. Murphy, *Okeechobee News* - Thursday April 17, 2008.
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Last week's fatal attack of Africanized Honey Bees (AFB) that claimed the life of an Okeechobee man in Viking Properties, resulted in a day of events meant to educate the public about this deadly new threat to Floridians.



[Dr.] William H. Kern, Junior, of the Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center for the University of Florida hosted a public meeting at the Okeechobee Cooperative Extension on Tuesday night to promote the concepts of Bee aware ... look, listen, and run.

Those are the strategies experts urge the public to use when they encounter these insects. Extension Agent Dan Culbert said about 125 people visited the Extension Service Offices on Tuesday to learn more about the insects.

“This has hit very close to home for the folks in this county. This is a problem that will increase over time in South Florida,” Mr. Kern said. He predicted the bees will become a problem all over Florida and other southern states. He noted they like the climate here and already have spread to Mississippi and south western Arkansas.

Honey bees have been in the United States since the 1600's. They are also found through Europe, Africa and the Middle East. There are many different subspecies with different characteristics. The difference with Africanized honey bees is that they are more aggressive and will attack in large numbers. The first bee attack attracts the others to attack in one particular spot, he explained. The regular honey bees in your garden won't attack you unless you threaten their hives.

The sting of an AHB is not any more dangerous or toxic from one of the European Honey Bee (EHB), he said. In that respect, a single AHB is not any more dangerous than a honey bee common to Florida.

However you should not take them lightly because these bees are very aggressive and will attack in large numbers. Even those who are not normally sensitive to bee stings can die due to the number of stings inflicted in an AHB attack.

“It is important to get the stinger out as quickly as possible. The quicker you get it out the less venom you will have in your body,” he added.

Bees from the hive that attacked the man in Viking, Robert Davis, 51, were taken to Gainesville and tested in the University of Florida Research Lab. [*sic – the lab was the FDACS Division of Plant Industry Lab in Gainesville.*] The results were made public Tuesday.

Mr. Kern noted the bees tested in Viking were of EHB descent, but had been crossed with the more aggressive African variety. The queen was likely a European Honey Bee and the fathers were African Honey Bees, he said. (A single queen bee mates with several males.) Experts suggest that there are more colonies in the Viking area. The one involved in the fatal attack has been destroyed.

When a bee hive becomes crowded, bees “swarm.” A new Queen bee is created and a Queen and some of the hive leave to make a new hive. While European Honey Bees only swarm in the Spring -- AHB may swarm several times a year, which means their numbers spread more rapidly.

The size of an AHB swarm is about the size of a softball or volleyball, Mr. Kern said. They usually swarm four to twelve times per year mainly from February through October in South Florida, he said. However officials note they have seen swarms in every month of the year in South Florida.

“They don’t have a definitive swarming season. You can see them any month of the year here,” he said.

Another difference between EHB and AHB are AHB not particular in selecting the site of their nests. They can be in agriculture areas and residential areas. “They will set up in smaller places close to the ground like utility boxes, water meter boxes, abandoned tires, and concrete power poles. They love those,” he said. The bees will use any protected location or void to house their colony.

Florida has had 19 reports of African Honey Bee sting cases in recent months. Most of the cases were in South Florida and all were from Marion County south. Mr. Kern noted water meter readers and other utility meter readers can face some threats from these bees when they perform their tasks. Construction workers and heavy equipment operators can also face these threats on the job.

Mr. Kern told the group about one lady who was stung 200 times at a construction site before she knew what happened. “She didn’t even know which way to run,” he said. The woman was rescued by coworkers and was hospitalized. She survived the ordeal.

In Fort Myers, a man mowing a hay field agitated a colony. The man ran and jumped into a canal. The man thought he had gotten away. Instead the bees hovered above the water and attacked each time he came up for air. “He finally got the message that water is not a protection from bees,” he explained.

Some tips to avoid problems with the bees:

- Have a plan and communicate it with your family to avoid and to respond to stinging insects.
- Have a bee sting kit available if anyone in your family is allergic to bee stings.
- Eliminate potential nesting sites with professionals. Check walls and eaves of structures where hives can form.

Plug holes in your home's exterior. Nesting sites can include buckets, cans, empty boxes, in trees, holes in fences, and various boxes like electric boxes.

- Remain alert for bees. Look for bees in work areas before you use power equipment such as weed eaters, lawnmowers and chainsaws. Noise can excite bees.
- It is important to note that you should not stand still or get yourself trapped in a place or situation where you can't escape the attacking bees. Always look in trees before you prune or cut branches.
- If bees start to chase you, run in a straight line. Cover your face, nose, and mouth, and get inside a building or vehicle. Even if a few bees get inside the car or house with you, it is better than the alternative of staying outside and being vulnerable to hundreds of bees.
- Contact a licensed pest control operator to remove bee hives and nests.
- You should see a doctor if breathing is difficult, if you suffer several stings, or if you are allergic to bee stings.

You can remove a stinger by scraping it out with a fingernail or a credit card. Do not use your fingers or a tweezers, as squeezing the stinger can cause more venom to pump into the wound.

Emergency medical personnel, firemen, and sheriff deputies also attended training seminars at the Extension Office on Tuesday to help them handle any cases involving AHB.