

Local man dies after bee attack

Africanized bees in Viking subdivision

By Eric Kopp, © Okeechobee News

An Okeechobee man Thursday may be the first person in Florida to die of stings from an attack of Africanized honey bees.

Robert Davis, 51, N.W. 262nd St. was stung more than 100 times while working at an abandoned hunting camp just off of 101 Ranch Road in the Viking Subdivision Wednesday, April 9. He was apparently stung while demolishing a utility shed and disturbed a nest of bees, said Detective Ted Van Deman of the Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office (OCSO).

"This is an unfortunate thing for Okeechobee," said Dan Culbert from the Okeechobee County Extension Office. "This is the first Florida fatality from Africanized Honey Bees."

Detective Van Deman said a 9-1-1 call seeking medical assistance to the scene was received at 10:44 a.m. Friends of Mr. Davis started to take him to Raulerson Hospital. The Okeechobee County Fire/Rescue emergency personnel met Mr. Davis and his friends on U.S. 441 N. at Eagle Island Road. Mr. Davis required CPR from there to the hospital, said Detective Van Deman. Mr. Davis was placed in intensive care where he died the next day.

Detective Van Deman said an autopsy to determine the cause of death will be performed by the District 19 Medical Examiner's Office Saturday, April 12. "The death may not be due to bee stings, but probably is," said the detective.

An apiary inspector from the Florida Department of Agriculture was sent to the scene where he sprayed the hive to kill the queen. While some of the bees are still alive, they will all die within the next few days, said Detective Van Deman.

Although these bees are sometimes referred to as 'killer' bees, the detective said the Africanized bee is no more toxic than any other bee. Injury or death is caused by the bee's aggressive nature and the number of stings delivered as they swarm to protect their hive.

Because of the remote location, the distance from there to the hospital may have been a contributing factor to the death of Mr. Davis.

"There is a time frame from when a sensitive person is stung to when treatment begins," said Mr. Culbert. "Due to the distance from where he was to the hospital, that may have been a factor and the quantity of stings may have contributed to it."

The Africanized honey bee in the western hemisphere descended from 26 Tanzanian queen bees accidentally released by a replacement bee keeper in 1957 in the southeast portion of Brazil, states Wikipedia. Those hives were being operated by biologist Warwick E. Kerr, who was trying to breed a strain of bees that would be better adapted to tropical conditions than the European bees used in North American and southern South America.

The first swarm of Africanized bees was found in the U.S. in October 1990 in Hidalgo, Texas. Colonies were first reported in Arizona and New Mexico in 1993 and in California in October of 1994.

One problem facing professionals is that there is virtually no way to tell the difference between the Africanized bees and other honey bees except by DNA analysis.

Mr. Culbert said a bee hive inspector along with the deputy fire chief from the Okeechobee County Fire/Rescue Department went to the site where Mr. Davis was attacked. "Their task was to collect the bees and submit them to the Division of Plant Industry for DNA analysis," he continued. "They had to collect 50 bees that were freshly killed."

According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, Africanized bees spread from Brazil to the United States. Since their initial discovery in Florida in 2002, they have been found in every Florida county south of Marion County.

The bees reportedly spread at a rate of about 1-mile a day. While these bees have been found as far north as Kansas City, Mo., they are more commonly found in the South. The bees are expected to reach as far north as the Chesapeake Bay in the East. In California, they have been seen as far north as Santa Barbara and are expected to eventually occupy the San Francisco Bay area.

"As we get more urbanized, people are more afraid of bees in general," said Mr. Culbert. "There is a lack of knowledge of how bees work and how important they are to our economy and food supply." He went on to say that a good portion of our food crops are dependent on insect pollination. "We have a shortage of bees for pollination," he added.

To help people learn more about the Africanized honey bee, a free training seminar will be held at the Extension Office, 458 U.S. 98 N., on Tuesday, April 15. The seminar will be divided into three parts.

- * The first session will be from 10 a.m. until noon for first responders, fire fighters, EMTs, law enforcement officers, 9-1-1 supervisors and those who head up agricultural operations.
- * The second session will be from 2 until 4 p.m. for outdoor workers such as parks workers, utility workers, road crews, school maintenance workers and agricultural workers.
- * The third session will be held for the general public from 5 until 6:30 p.m.

Mr. Culbert said they can accommodate up to 50 people at the office and if there is a large response from the general public the seminar may be moved. "If we get an overwhelming response, we do have permission to move to the Okeechobee County Civic Center," he said. The Civic Center is located on U.S. 98 N.

He suggested that those who interested in attending the evening seminar call the Extension Office on Monday, April 14, to see where it will be held. Their phone number is 863-763-6469.

The first person to die in the U.S. from Africanized honey bee stings was Lino Lopez, 82, on July 15, 1993. He was stung more than 40 times while trying to remove a colony from a wall in an abandoned building on his ranch near Harlingen, Texas.

Bee Precautions

Wear light-colored clothing. Bees tend to attack dark things. Dark clothing, dark hair or anything dark in color could draw an attack.

- Bees are sensitive to odors -- both pleasant and unpleasant. The smell of newly-cut grass has been shown to disturb honey bees. Avoid wearing floral or citrus aftershaves or perfume.
- Check your house and yard at least once a month to see if there are any signs of bees taking up residence. If you do find a swarm or colony, leave it be and keep family and pets away. Find a pest control company or a local beekeeper to solve the problem.
- To help prevent honey bees from building a colony in your house or yard, fill all cracks and crevices in walls with steel wool and caulk.
- Remove piles of refuse -- honey bees will nest in an old soda can or an overturned flower pot. Fill holes in the ground.
- If you are allergic to bee stings, always have a bee sting kit with you.

If attacked by bees:

- Any covering for your body especially for your head and face -- will help you escape. Grab a blanket, coat, towel - anything that will give you momentary relief while you look for an avenue of escape.
- If you have nothing else, pull your shirt up over your face. The stings to your chest and abdomen are far less serious than those to the facial area.
- Try to find shelter as soon as possible. Take refuge in a house, tent or a car with the windows and doors closed.
 - DO NOT JUMP INTO WATER! Bees will wait for you to come up for air.
 - Once you are away from the bees evaluate the situation. If you have been stung more than 15 times, or if you are having any symptoms other than local pain and swelling, seek medical attention immediately.
 - If you see someone else being stung or think others are in danger, call 9-1-1 immediately.
 - Remove stingers as soon as possible to lessen the amount of venom entering the body. Scrape stingers off the skin with a blunt instrument or plastic card. DO NOT remove bee stingers with fingers or tweezers -- this only forces toxins into the victim's body.

Bee Safety

The best safety advice is to avoid an encounter with unfriendly Africanized bees. Be alert for danger. Remember that the bees sting to defend their colony, so be on the lookout for honey bee swarms and colonies.

- Be alert for bees coming in and out of an opening such as a crack in a wall or the hole in a utility box.
- Listen for the hum of an active bee colony.
- Look for bees in holes in the ground, holes in trees or cacti, and in sheds.
- Be extra careful when moving junk that has been lying around.
- Be alert for bees that are acting strangely. Quite often bees will display some preliminary defensive behavior before going into a full-fledged attack.
- When you are outdoors -- in a rural area, park or wilderness reserve -- be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye out for bees the way you would watch out for snakes and other natural dangers.
- Don't panic at the sight of a few bees foraging in the flowers. Bees are generally very docile as they go about their normal activities.
- NEVER spray bees with insecticide sold to kill wasps and hornets. Not only will it not kill the bees, it could also cause them to swarm and attack.