

World's biggest hornets, with a sting that can kill, land in United States

By Nicholas K. Geranios, Associated Press on 05.15.20

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Image 1. A giant hornet from Japan is displayed at the Washington State Department of Agriculture on May 4, 2020, in Olympia, Washington. The insect, which has been found in Washington state, is the world's largest hornet and has been dubbed the "murder hornet" because of its appetite for honey bees, and a sting that can be fatal to some people. Photo: Ted S. Warren/AP Photo

SPOKANE, Washington — The world's largest hornet, a 2-inch killer dubbed the "murder hornet" with an appetite for honey bees, has been found in Washington state, where entomologists were making plans to wipe it out.

The giant Asian insect, with a sting that could be fatal to some people, is just now starting to emerge from winter hibernation.

"They're like something out of a monster cartoon with this huge yellow-orange face," said Susan Cobey, a bee breeder at Washington State University (WSU).

"It's a shockingly large hornet," said Todd Murray, a WSU Extension entomologist and invasive species specialist. "It's a health hazard, and more importantly, a significant predator of honey bees."

The hornet was sighted for the first time in the United States in December 2019, when the state Department of Agriculture verified two reports near Blaine, Washington, close to the Canadian border. It also received two probable, but unconfirmed, reports from sites in Custer, Washington, south of Blaine.

The hornet can sting through most beekeeper suits, deliver nearly seven times the amount of venom as a honey bee and sting multiple times, the department said, adding that it ordered special reinforced suits from China.

The university said it isn't known how or where the hornets arrived in North America. It normally lives in the forests and low mountains of eastern and southeast Asia and feeds on large insects, including wasps and bees. It was dubbed the "Murder Hornet" in Japan, where it is known to kill people.

The hornet's life cycle begins in April, when queens emerge from hibernation, feed on plant sap and fruit and look for underground dens to build their nests.

Hornets are most destructive in the late summer and early fall. Like a marauding army, they attack honey bee hives, killing adult bees and devouring larvae and pupae, WSU said.

Their stings are big and painful, with a potent neurotoxin. Multiple stings can kill humans, even if they are not allergic, the university said.

Farmers depend on honey bees to pollinate many important northwest crops such as apples, blueberries and cherries. With the threat from giant hornets, "beekeepers may be reluctant to bring their hives here," said Island County Extension scientist Tim Lawrence.

An invasive species can dramatically change growing conditions, Murray said, adding that now is the time to deal with the predators.

"We need to teach people how to recognize and identify this hornet while populations are small, so that we can eradicate it while we still have a chance," Murray said.

The state Department of Agriculture will begin trapping queens this spring, with a focus on Whatcom, Skagit, San Juan and Island counties.

Hunting the hornets is no job for ordinary people.

"Don't try to take them out yourself if you see them," Murray said. "If you get into them, run away, then call us!"



Quiz

1 Read the following summary of the article.

The world's largest hornets have recently been spotted in the United States near Canada. Also called the "murder hornet," the insects are an invasive species known for their attacks on honey bee hives and their dangerously toxic stings. State officials plan to trap queens to eradicate the species from North America.

Is this summary accurate and objective? How do you know?

- (A) Yes; it describes the role of the queens to show how they cause the hornets to become invasive in some areas.
- (B) Yes; it outlines the threat posed by the hornets and what is being done about it to explain why their arrival is noteworthy.
- (C) No; it only vaguely notes the location where the hornets were spotted and does not explain their country of origin.
- (D) No; it subjectively characterizes the hornets as murderers without offering evidence of why they are called this.

2 Read the following two details from the article.

"It's a shockingly large hornet," said Todd Murray, a WSU Extension entomologist and invasive species specialist. "It's a health hazard, and more importantly, a significant predator of honey bees."

"We need to teach people how to recognize and identify this hornet while populations are small, so that we can eradicate it while we still have a chance," Murray said.

Select the answer choice that BEST explains how these details develop a central idea of the article.

- (A) Both details illustrate the professional expertise of Todd Murray regarding the hornet's potential to be invasive.
- (B) Both details demonstrate the alarm that experts feel regarding the size of the hornets compared with honey bees.
- (C) Both details emphasize the need to eliminate the hornet populations before they become a more serious problem.
- (D) Both details contribute to the view that individuals are key to helping the Department of Agriculture eliminate the hornets.

3 Which sentence BEST explains how the hornets might affect farmers in the northwest United States?

- (A) The hornets have the power to dramatically change growing conditions in the northwest, forcing farmers to adapt by growing different kinds of crops than they currently do.
- (B) The hornets have stings that are painful and full of neurotoxins, meaning that farmers in the northwest have had to order specially reinforced suits to wear while working outside.
- (C) The hornets' potential to devastate honey bees may make beekeepers reluctant to bring their hives to the northwest, where farmers depend on them to pollinate many of their crops.
- (D) The hornets' reputation as killers of honey bees might make farmers consider moving their crops elsewhere, which would reduce the need for beekeepers in the northwest.

4 Which of the following ideas did the author develop LEAST in this article about the hornets?

- (A) the way in which ordinary people can report sightings of the hornets
- (B) the strength of the hornet's sting compared with honey bees
- (C) the timing of the hornet's life cycle from spring through early fall
- (D) the opinions of experts and entomologists about the hornets