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Yellow and Black Is Not Always Dangerous

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Yellow and black can look alarming, especially when a large hornet suddenly appears in the garden. But appearances can be deceptive. Most wasps and hornets are useful insects, while one invasive species deserves particular attention: the Asian hornet.

I recently found a dead hornet in my garden and realised I was not completely sure which species it was. It turned out to be an Asian hornet, also known as the yellow-legged hornet. It is mostly dark, with a distinctive orange band on the abdomen and striking yellow legs. A European hornet looks quite different: it is generally larger and more colourful, with a reddish-brown head and thorax, a yellow-and-black abdomen and reddish-brown legs.

The native European hornet may look impressive, but it is generally not aggressive when left alone. It mainly hunts other insects, including flies and mosquitoes, and can even be active at night. Unlike the common wasps that are attracted to soft drinks and barbecues in late summer, European hornets have little interest in human food and sweets. A hornet in the garden can therefore be a natural pest controller rather than a nuisance.

Wasps in general are valuable members of the ecosystem. They catch large numbers of flies, mosquitoes and caterpillars to feed their larvae with protein-rich prey. Some species also help with pollination and contribute to breaking down organic material. The familiar wasp around a picnic is only a tiny part of a much larger group. Europe is home to thousands of wasp species, most of which have little interest in people and pose no threat to us.

Nature even has its own wasp impersonators. Hoverflies, for example, often have yellow-and-black patterns that make them look remarkably convincing. Some moths do the same, including clearwing species that resemble wasps or hornets. These insects have no sting and are harmless to people. Their resemblance is a form of mimicry that can help deter predators, while hoverflies can also play a role in pollination.

The Asian hornet is the exception that deserves extra vigilance. This invasive species preys on honeybees, wild bees and other pollinating insects. Around beehives, Asian hornets can hunt in front of the entrance, catching bees as they return. This can put colonies under severe pressure. The species was first recorded in Europe in southwest France in 2004 and has since spread to several European countries.

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For people, the greatest danger comes from disturbing a nest. A solitary Asian hornet normally does not attack simply because a person is nearby, but a colony can defend its nest aggressively. If you suspect an Asian hornet nest, keep your distance and do not try to remove it yourself. If possible, take a photograph from a safe position and report the sighting through a recognised reporting system.

So, before swatting at every yellow-and-black insect, take a closer look. It could be a useful wasp, a European hornet, a harmless hoverfly or a moth copying their appearance. But a mostly dark hornet with conspicuously yellow legs deserves attention. In Europe, suspected invasive species can be reported through the European Alien Species Information Network (EASIN), helping experts monitor their spread.

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