



Entomology Insect Information Series

Providing Leadership in Environmental Entomology

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THE AFRICANIZED HONEY BEE (Q & A)

This update is a list of frequently asked questions about the Africanized Honey Bee. Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have prepared this list of questions and answers to help educate the public on the Africanized Honey Bee.

1. Question: Are Africanized honey bees the same frightening "killer bees" I've read about and seen on the news and in movies?

2. Question: When did the AHB enter the U.S. and what states have AHBs?

Answer: The first known AHBs to enter the U.S. from Mexico occurred in the Rio Grande River Valley near Hidalgo, Texas, on October 15, 1990. The AHBs have now spread mostly westward in the U.S. and are now found in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Texas.

3. Question: Will the Africanized Honey Bee move into South Carolina?

Answer: Nobody knows for sure, but some scientists believe they will survive only in the southern United States where winters are relatively mild. Our Coastal and Pee Dee areas of South Carolina are within this mild winter range. Other bee scientists predict the AHB will survive wherever other honey bees are kept which includes all of South Carolina.

4. Question: How fast do AHBs spread?

Answer: AHBs spread through South and Central America at a rate of 100 to 300 miles per year. The bees have continued a rapid spread through the extreme southwestern U.S., but their easterly spread has been much slower and they have not advanced east of Texas. This phenomenon has scientists perplexed looking for an explanation for the stall in the eastward advance of the AHB in the U.S. This could be

a temporary halt in the advance eastward or the AHB may have reached their northern limit of range expansion into North America.

5. Question: Is one sting from an AHB deadly?

Answer: One sting from an AHB bee is no more painful or dangerous than a sting from any other honey bee, but AHBs tend to sting with less provocation and in greater numbers than other honey bees. It is important to remember that one sting from any bee can be harmful, even fatal, if the person stung is allergic to bee venom. People allergic to bee venom should always carry a first-aid sting kit with them. The best way to keep from being stung is to stay away from places where the bees live, including managed and wild colonies.

6. Question: What makes AHBs and other bees sting?

Answer: Honey bees sting when their nest is threatened by invaders. AHBs are different from our local honey bees in that they tend to defend their hives more quickly and in greater numbers. Generally, Africanized honey bees pursue intruders further than other honey bees do.

7. Question: How many stings will Africanized honey bees inflict if their nest is threatened?

Answer: Like all honey bees, AHBs sting only once because they die shortly after stinging. However, as a group, AHBs tend to inflict more stings than domestic honey bees because they react in greater numbers. One study shows that, in similar situations, Africanized honey bees have stinging responses ten times greater than that of the domestic honey bees. Whatever the number of stings, AHBs can be very serious pests and must be treated with caution.

8. Question: Have human deaths occurred in the U.S. as a result of AHB stings?

Answer: Yes, between 1993 and 1999, six deaths have been attributed to AHBs in the U.S. These cases have mostly involved elderly adults who could not escape and received multiple stings.

9. Question: What does an Africanized honey bee look like?

Answer: To the naked eye, an AHB looks just like any other honey bee. The only way to distinguish between Africanized and other honey bees is by microscopic examination. Honey bees are brown or black and covered with hair.

10. Question: How fast does an Africanized Honey Bee fly?

Answer: About the same as any honey bee, about 12-15 miles an hour.

11. Question: How far will an AHB chase an intruder?

Answer: Some have been known to fly as far as a quarter mile, but they usually stop if they can't detect an intruder or if there is no longer a threat to their colony.

12. Question: How can I stay away from an AHB swarm and avoid getting stung?

Answer: People unfamiliar with beekeeping should always stay away from all bees and swarms, regardless of the kind of bee. If you see a swarm or hive of bees, regardless of the kind of bees inside, it is best just to walk away.

13. Question: Will a swarm chase me?

Answer: Because swarms are not established colonies with hives to defend, most will not chase you. Most bees, including the AHB, are not particularly defensive if they don't have a home to defend.

14. Question: What is being done in South Carolina to prepare for the arrival of the Africanized Honey Bee?

Answer: A South Carolina Africanized Honey Bee Advisory Committee was formed in April 1989. The committee has formulated a State Africanized Honey Bee Management Plan.

Reference: James Tew, June 1990, "Frequently asked questions about the Africanized Honey Bee", USDA Backgrounder, USDA, Washington, D.C.

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