



Topic of the Month Africanized Honey Bees



Fig. 1. Dr. James D. Ellis, Jr. and his bees.



Fig. 2. It may be hard to escape from under a crawl space in a “stinging emergency”.

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Africanized honey bees (AHB) have made their way into the state of Florida. AHBs breed with and out-compete the European strain of honey bees that normally inhabit our state. As we learn to deal with this change in our pollinator population, we thought it would be a good time to address the issue in the Pest Press newsletter. First we will discuss a bit about AHBs and their behavior, and then we will have a dialogue with Dr. Jamie Ellis, an apiculturist and AHB expert.

We, in IFAS at the University of Florida, are not referring to these bees as “killer bees,” we encourage people to use the proper term, Africanized honey bees. Also, it is common to make the mistake in describing the bees as “aggressive” when in fact, they are “defensive”. They react to what we do and defend themselves. The AHBs do not sit and plot attacks on humans. Labels of “killer bees” and “aggressive” are believed to provoke unnecessary fear in the general public, similar to the kind of hysteria seen in movies like “Killer Bees” (1974) and “The Swarm” (1978).

I would not be surprised if most people first hear about Africanized Bees via these B-grade movies. I am very pleased to tell you that in Florida, we do not have to learn about AHB via B-grade movies or perhaps worse, the Internet. Dr. James “Jamie” D. Ellis, Jr. has recently joined the UF faculty (Fig. 1). He will assume the duties associated with apiculture and youth. Following is an interview with Dr. Ellis about AHBs. More information about AHBs may be obtained from the Florida Department of Agriculture at <http://www.doacs.state.fl.us/press/2005/07192005.html>. If AHBs have already been detected in your area of Florida, you may want to develop a lesson about AHBs for your class.

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Faith: “What are some common AHB nesting sites?”

Jamie: “Common AHB nesting sites include:”

- abandoned vehicles
- empty containers
- places with holes
- fences
- lumber piles
- manholes
- water meters
- utility infrastructures
- old tires
- trees
- garages
- outbuildings
- sheds
- walls
- chimneys
- crawl spaces under houses or buildings (Fig. 2)

Faith: “What should someone do if they are in a stinging incident?”

Jamie: “If personnel find themselves in a stinging incident, they should not stay in one place and swat the bees. Remember, AHBs are trying to defend their nest. When a stinging event happens, the victim is too close to the nest and they need to leave the area. As long as the person remains still, the bees likely will become more agitated. Furthermore, do not hide in thick underbrush or water. It may take the bees 30 minutes or longer to leave an area! Finally, seek shelter (in a building, a vehicle, etc.). Remember, some bees will enter the shelter with you, but not as many as will remain outside.”

(Note: Africanized Bees will attack dark colors, going for eyes, nose, mouth. Some estimates say that it will take about 5 stings per pound to kill a person—some estimates are higher.)

Faith: “What are the 2 or 3 most important pieces of information about AHBs? Is there anything that can prevent AHB from taking up residence in a typical yard--any landscaping that is particularly prone to bee colonization or the like?”

Jamie:

“(1) In order to 'bee-proof' a building, one must remove all potential nesting sites (see list). This may seem easily done, but consider the number of houses and lots that have any of the potential nesting sites listed.

(2) From March-July (swarming season), one should inspect their property weekly for the presence of unusual bee activity.

(3) Finally, one should seal openings greater than 1/8-inch in walls, around chimneys, plumbing, and other openings by installing screens (1/8-inch hardware cloth) over such openings (rain spouts, vents, cavities of trees and fence posts, water meter/utility boxes, etc.). AHB utilize all of the places as nesting sites.

(Note: Exclusion of entry points is a principle of IPM and will also keep out other unwanted pests.)

Closing remarks: Africanized Honey Bees strike fear in the hearts of people and what we want is people to respect the bees. The AHB populations CAN be more defensive, but there are also defensive European bees as well. The European honey bees (EHB) that beekeepers work with have been bred for hundreds of years to be docile. It is my understanding that in Honduras, where the AHB populations have taken over, the pollination and honey production did experience a slight dip during the transition period between EHB and AHB. However, they are now exporting honey again and AHB are being selected for the more docile traits.

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