



Africanized Honey Bees



General Information

European and Africanized honey bees are not native to the Americas. In fact, there are no native honey bees found here. In an effort to increase honey production and bee survival in tropical regions, an experiment to cross the mild mannered but less productive European honey bee, *Apis mellifera*, with the aggressive but more productive African race, *Apis mellifera scutellata*, was begun in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1956. Shortly after the experiment began, several colonies of the “Africanized” bees escaped captivity and began to expand their range and population. The first sightings of Africanized honey bees in the United States were reported in late 1990. By 1993, Africanized honey bees had made their way into Arizona.

Although nicknamed “killer bees”, Africanized honey bees do not roam around searching for something to kill. However, they can be extremely aggressive when defending their colony. In an Africanized honey bee attack, a larger number of bees will attack the perceived threat, and in many cases, the attack lasts longer and covers more distance than that of European honey bees. Many victims of Africanized honey bee attacks have suffered hundreds of stings, a few have been stung several thousand times.

Although frightening to humans, a swarm of bees in flight or resting on a tree or bush is not a threat. Single bees out collecting pollen or water are also not a threat. *Africanized honey bees protecting their colony are a serious threat to anyone nearby.*

Within Saguaro National Park, wild bee colonies are quite common. Park biologists estimate that hundreds of bee colonies call Saguaro National Park home. All of these colonies are now considered to be Africanized. Since Africanized honey bees are virtually indiscernible from their European counterparts, park visitors encountering aggressive bees should always treat them with respect and leave the area immediately.



Prevention

While hiking, be on the alert. Listen for bees and watch for them entering or exiting a colony. Africanized honey bees are not as selective about nesting sites as European bees. As a result, Africanized colonies can be found in almost any protected place such as rocky areas, underground, in cliff faces, inside a saguaro cavity, inside trees and even around and within buildings and other structures.

Africanized honey bees can reproduce quickly. Consequently, when a colony gets too crowded, a large group of bees leaves the colony to find a new home. These swarming bees always have a queen with them, but are not generally considered to be dangerous.

However, if you approach an established Africanized bee colony, the guard bees will often warn you to stay away by repeatedly “head butting” your body. While it is rare for Africanized bees to sting while “bumping” a threat to their colony, if you do not retreat, a full blown attack is imminent.

Honey bees must live close to water, which they use to maintain temperature and humidity within the colony. Be cautious around any water source. Bee experts recommend wearing light colored clothing as bees seem to be less attracted to these colors. They also recommend not wearing perfume or cologne as their odor may attract bees.

If You Are Attacked

Get Away Quickly

Run from attacking bees and seek shelter in an enclosed space such as a vehicle or building. If cover is not available, continue running until the bees stop chasing you. In some cases this distance may be as much as one half mile.

Cover Your Head

Africanized honey bees target the eyes, ears, nose and mouth when attacking. Use your shirt or jacket to cover your head while running away. Keep the hole you are looking out of as small as possible, without impairing your vision.

Do Not Kill Attacking Bees

If you kill an attacking bee, it will release an alarm scent that will attract other bees from the colony.

Do Not Flail Your Arms

Flailing your arms or swatting at bees will only make the attack worse.

Seek Medical Attention

If you are attacked by Africanized honey bees, call 911 and seek medical attention immediately.

Report the Attack

For the safety of other visitors, report the exact location of any bee attack to park staff as soon as possible. Both visitor centers are open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. After hours, you may leave a message by calling (520) 733-5153 for the east district or (520) 733-5158 for the west district.

If You Are Stung

Africanized honey bee venom is no more toxic than that of the European honey bee. In most cases, the danger lies in the number of stings associated with an Africanized honey bee attack. Those unable to run from an attack, such as the very young or very old, or persons with disabilities are at greater risk of multiple stings. Additionally, some people exhibit a hypersensitivity to bee venom. If stung, the resulting anaphylactic shock can be life threatening.

If you are stung, remove embedded stingers as quickly as possible. Use your fingernail, a credit card or similar instrument to scrape them away. Do not attempt to remove a stinger with your fingers or tweezers as this will force more venom into your flesh. After a bee attack, call 911 and seek medical attention immediately, especially if you are allergic to bee venom or feel ill.