Africanized Killer Bees Live Up to Their Name in Arizona

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Attacks by Africanized Variety Plague Southern Part of State; a Mountaineer and a Man Walking His Dog Fall Victim

By JIM CARLTON

TUCSON, Ariz.—The bees looked innocuous enough as a few dozen buzzed around the edge of a Spanish tile roof in a sleepy subdivision here recently.

But then pest remover Chris Brinton found a hole beneath the roof where a hive had been built. The colony contained as many as 20,000 Africanized honey bees—the kind that have been wreaking havoc in southern Arizona during what local experts call an unusually bad year for attacks on people.

"That's not no small problem," Mr. Brinton, clad in bee-keeping gear, called down as more than 100 bees guarding the hive went after him.

So far this year, at least six incidents of people each being stung more than 50 times in apparent Africanized bee attacks have been reported in Tucson and Arizona rural areas, compared with two to four annually between 2009 and 2012, according to the University of Arizona's Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center.

Another 30 people have been victims of apparent Africanized bee attacks in the Phoenix area, said Frank LoVecchio, co-medical director of the Banner Good Samaritan Poison and Drug Information Center in Phoenix.

Some attacks have been horrific. On May 6, 55-year-old Steven Wallace Johnson of Tucson was found dead with hundreds of stings after being attacked by a bee swarm on his rope while traversing rocks in some mountains south of Tucson, according to local sheriff's deputies.

The attacks, while still considered rare, have unnerved Arizonans because many have occurred with little provocation. "It's a fear of, 'I'm walking around, minding my own business, and I'm attacked,'" said Mazda Shirazi, medical director of the university center.

Africanized bees—which are largely indistinguishable from European honey bees, the common variety seen in the U.S.—have colonized mostly Sunbelt states since entering the U.S. about 20
years ago. They are descendants of highly aggressive Africanized bees that were accidentally turned loose in Brazil more than a half-century ago and began migrating north.

Dubbed "killer bees," the insects have lived up to their billing less frequently than some might imagine. In Texas, for example, an average of one person a year dies from an Africanized bee attack, while 100 to 200 people are treated annually for the stings, said William McKenna, a physician in Harlingen, Texas, who sees many patients.

The reason the bees aren't more deadly, he suggested, is that most people can outrun a bee attack if they are able to run at least a quarter of a mile. The worst injuries, he added, happen to victims who can't run. "There is a certain percentage who, once the bees get on them, they go in shock and don't leave," Dr. McKenna said.

Arizona's colonies have proven more aggressive than other states' this year, most bee experts here agree. "For some odd reason, they are trying to kill us more this year," said Mr. Brinton, owner of Bee Bustin LLC, a hive-removal firm.

That could be because southern Arizona experienced an unusually severe cold snap in January, which killed many hives and allowed the remaining ones to grow much bigger because they had more food for themselves, said Justin Schmidt, an entomologist at the University of Arizona. The bees usually attack when they perceive their hive is threatened, such as from a loud noise, Mr. Schmidt said.

Since March, when Tucson's bee-swarming season started, city firefighters say they have responded to at least 75 calls of Africanized bees. "They have got to be our most horrific calls," said Mario Carrasco, a firefighter who recalled the case of a man who was attacked by a swarm and died last year after walking his dog in a city park. "It was like a blanket of bees on him," he said.

One of the calls this spring was to a Golf N' Stuff amusement park on Tucson's east side, where a woman was attacked by hundreds of bees after disturbing their hive in a dry riverbed while walking nearby. The woman, whose name wasn't released, survived the attack, but witnesses were left in shock. "There were bees stinging firefighters, going after cars in traffic," said Susie Lampkin, general manager of the park. "They were angry, very angry."

Mindful of this testiness, Mr. Brinton advised two bystanders to move back as he clambered up a ladder at a two-story home on Tucson's west side. A tenant, Zack Vindiola, 23, had reported seeing two bees inside the two-bedroom rental he shares with his wife and their 1-year-old son. Mr. Brinton used a can of pesticide to kill the bees and spent the next two hours digging out a honeycomb that measured four feet high, eight inches wide and 24 inches thick.

His parting advice to landlord Michael Espinoza: Fill the hole to prevent a hive from being rebuilt. "If you leave it," Mr. Brinton said, "it will be a basic bull's eye to bees saying, 'Come on in.'"

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A version of this article appeared June 20, 2013, on page A8 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Killer Bees Live Up to Their Name in Arizona.