

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

BALD-FACED



By [Alex Fethiere](#)

Public domain

This disc at the base/back of the bald-faced hornets' paper nest is packed with grubs.

I've had a banner year of pollinators. The mason bee nest is full and I'm seeing such a variety of wasps, bees and flies that I've stopped worrying about stings when I'm working in the garden.

Of bees, only honeybees and bumblebees sting. Many have said it's hard to keep bees on Harstine Island, and bumbles are very reticent about stinging. Early this summer, a friend disturbed a ground nest of bumblebees while using a machine to dig up bamboo, and for all that, one of his three-man crew was stung once.

Paper wasps also feed on nectar and sting, but that's stretching it. If I let pollinator activity keep me from working, I'd never get anything done.

I was harvesting comfrey beside the Polish root parsley, which I'm allowing to bolt - for the seeds. It's too tall to stand and has made its area a sprawling tangle aswarm with pollinators.

It was late afternoon. Pollinators are most active on the root parsley at that time. The usual steady hum of bees began to stutter.

Looking up at the flowers, I noticed the flight of many bumbles was being interrupted by another type of flying critter. This had turned the Polish root parsley into an aerial mosh pit without harassing the smaller bugs - only crashing into bumbles.

Against my better judgment, I stayed close and even tried to shoot some video with my phone. Nothing came of it. I quit the garden when I made out the black-and-white coloration of bald-faced hornets.

These aggressive beasts will sting at the slightest provocation. Their venom hurts more, and longer, than anything else that's stung me.

The "Schmidt Sting Pain Index" is published in entomologist Justin Schmidt's book, "The Sting of the Wild." Schmidt has been stung by 83 creatures across the world and describes the bald-faced hornet's attack as "similar to getting your hand smashed in a revolving door."

The hornets seemed to be attacking the bumble bees. I checked the internet to see whether that happens, and indeed, they were raiding them for food.

Bald-faced hornets can eat up to 40 bees in an hour. I don't know where the hornet nest is, and that bumblebee hive has been in the ground 6 feet from the garden for years. The hornets had made it an Apple-bees.

Having extinguished a bald-faced hornet nest a few years ago with a judicious combination of fire and high-pressure water, I knew a dousing would confuse the hornets. I turned on the sprinkler that serves the area and sure enough, it drove off everyone after a few passes.

Last year I advised that wasps be left alone to serve their ecologies. After seeing this behavior, I looked further into the functions of bald-faced hornets.

Like other wasps and hornets, they feed on all kinds of insects. They can decapitate a crane fly (think "mosquito hawk," which they aren't) in midair, and I shuddered to think they might be doing the bees like that.

A pest-control website advises that bald-faced hornets are dangerous enough to warrant removal regardless of their environmental benefits. Another such website reports that they most like to sting - and squirt venom at! - faces, and still another adds that their facial recognition and memory is almost as good as Facebook's: They will fly past other people to attack someone who has threatened their nest in the past.

Pest-control websites have an obvious agenda, and I have enough yellowjackets loitering about to do the work of all those bald-faced hornets. They're likelier to leave the bumbles alone.

It turns out that the hornet nest could be within three football fields of the Polish root parsley. I'll leave it to be destroyed by foraging birds come winter.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

Connect With Us

Shelton-Mason County Journal

227 West Cota Street
P.O. Box 430
Shelton, WA 98584
Ph: (360) 426-4412
Fax: (360) 426-9399

© 2022 Shelton-Mason County Journal

Powered by [ROAR Online Publication Software](#) from Lions Light Corporation
© Copyright 2022