

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

Wasp-wasted

Peninsula Permaculture · August 5, 2021 · Page A-11



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: The cinnabar moth caterpillar feasts on tansy ragwort, undisturbed by our many insectivorous wasps and hornets. (Public domain)

I was stung while weed-wacking one summer. The pain was searing and shooting, and it only took two stabs to put me to flight.

Dropping the weed wacker and running, I remembered the childhood fables about wasps and bees. Not having a body of water to submerge myself in, I did a lap around a maple glade. That seemed to shake them.

I cautiously looped back to the attack site, alert for any movement on the air. Fortunately, I'd gotten a look at my assailant: its black and white coloring was unmistakable. I had stumbled on a nest of bald-faced hornets.

I had unwittingly created conditions ideal for their nesting by leaving a decrepit stepladder opened on top of some rotting wood near a drip line. They had nested under the ladder's platform with ease, since the wood and water they needed to make paper pulp were 2 feet below them.

Getting rid of them in the middle of a perennial garden would be tricky. Spraying the required amount of insecticide would affect the soil for years.

Instead, I started a small fire in a washing-machine drum. These lightweight, ventilated cylinders make excellent fire starters for brush piles, and I kept this fire close by in the belief that its smoke and heat would protect me.

Then I hosed the nest down with a pressure nozzle, and once it hit the ground I rolled the burning drum over it with a pole. The wet wood on which it settled smoldered as the nest burned.

Converging to protect the nest, wasps zipped over my head in the urgency of their mission. The few not incinerated were too smoke-drunk to move until the fire crept over them in its spread.

I try not to kill wasps. Ideally their populations will be checked by insectivores, and they fill an important role in the ecology.

Whether predatory or parasitic, wasps eat caterpillars. The tomato hornworm, for example, is beset by a braconid wasp when the wasp wants to settle down. Though it eats nectar, *Cotesia congregata*

reproduces in tomato hornworms. Its larvae make white picket fences of cocoons on the surface of the worms after hollowing them out.

Bald-faced hornets take a more direct route with their powerful mandibles and stingers. Stung prey is incapacitated and taken back to the nest for the grubs. It seems a Faustian bargain for humans: trading our pest caterpillars for more hornets.

It's not such a bad deal if you leave them alone. Permaculturist Steve Sobkowiak encourages wasps to colonize his apple orchards because they protect the trees and fruit.

He recommends that horticulturalists know where their nests are, especially the approach and exit paths, and stay away from them. They don't want to waste venom on humans and will buzz your face in warning. In a paper wasp or bald-faced hornet nest, one need only stay clear of the opening.

Sobkowiak feels strongly enough about this that he borders his wasp nests in caution tape when customers come by for U-pick. (Don't tell his liability insurance.)

So I let paper wasp nests be, unless they are on my buildings. I would have ignored those bald-faced hornets if they hadn't been near my asparagus!

I have seen only three caterpillars this year — all cinnabar moth larvae. The birds and wasps won't have them because they bioaccumulate tansy ragwort toxins as they eat it, and I don't disturb them because they control tansy ragwort.

Tempted to romanticize the web of life working in harmony, I recall that the cinnabar moth was introduced from Eurasia to suppress tansy ragwort. Sometimes the web of life works even when some of its strands are synthetic.

■ *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.*

Originally published in the print edition of the Shelton-Mason County Journal, August 5, 2021, page A-11.

Transcribed from the page scan in the SmallTownPapers archive: <https://smc.stparchive.com/Archive/SMC/SMC08052021P11.php>