

France fights back Asian hornet invader

August 20 2014, by Philippe Bernes-Lasserre



A person holds an Asian hornet, with its stinger poking out, in Saint-Paul-les-Dax, southwestern France, on August 5, 2014

They slipped into southwest France 10 years ago in a pottery shipment from China and have since invaded more than half the country, which is fighting back with drones, poisoned rods and even chickens.

The Asian hornet, or *vespa velutina nigrithorax*, is considered a "public

enemy" in parts of France where it devours native bees and, experts say, threatens biodiversity.

"It's exploding (in numbers) and causing trouble," said Eric Darrouzet, a biologist at the Research Institute for the Biology of Insects (IRBI) at the University of Tours.

But some kind of solution may be in sight.

Pest controller Etienne Roumailhac is exhausted, called to destroy at least six nests a day in the Landes region on the Atlantic coast. Each nest can house thousands of [hornets](#).

"I find them everywhere: garden sheds, mail boxes, car radiators, watering cans," he said. "Eighty percent of my calls are now in cities or towns or right nearby. It's going wild."

As the hornet population peaks in mid-summer, business booms as he dislodges nests up to 70 centimetres long (28 inches), sometimes 20 metres (65 feet) up in a tree.

Blacklist

Roumailhac has tried drones but they get caught in branches, are awkward in urban areas and require official permits that are not easy to get. He relies mainly on a telescopic rod that shoots out insecticide.

Amateur beekeeper Francis Ithurburu swears by another weapon: young chickens that feast on hornets bothering his bees in the town of Biscarrosse. The hornets hover like helicopters by the hives, which gives them an advantage in attacking bees but makes them an easy target for hungry chickens.

With [native bees](#) providing more than half the hornets' diet, he and other beekeepers have declared war on the pests.



A nest of Asian hornets is seen in Saint-Paul-les-Dax, southwestern France, on August 5, 2014

"It's a fascinating species," said biologist Darrouzet. "The way they build their nests is marvellous," but he concedes "they've become a problem".

Indigenous to Southeast Asia, the hornet, with its distinctive yellow legs and dark thorax, can fan out rapidly. New colonies have cropped up 70 kilometres (44 miles) farther in France each year. Other hornets "hitchhike" into new territory, inadvertently carried by man.

In 2012, France branded the insect a "tropical, invasive species harmful for apiculture", and last year temporarily allowed their destruction with sulphur dioxide, a controversial and restricted chemical linked to respiratory problems.

Yet the hornets have crossed into Spain, Portugal and Italy with a few sightings in Belgium.

In April, Britain put them on a "blacklist", as a Parliamentary report warned the "deadly" invader could soon cross the Channel and land on British shores.

Amid the alarm, British papers claimed that six people in France stung by the "killer" hornets died from anaphylactic shock, but the French Anti-Poison Centre contends that they are no more dangerous than other bees or wasps.

Deaths from all sorts of bee stings have remained stable in France despite the [invasion](#), at about 15 per year, it said.

Panic

So what is the real danger?

"We've spoken mainly about its impact on domestic bees and forgotten to address its impact on biodiversity," said Franck Muller, who researches Asian hornets at the Museum of Natural History in Paris.



A pest controller prepares his equipment to neutralize a nest of Asian hornets, at a private garden in Saint-Paul-les-Dax, southwestern France, on August 5, 2014

The species is highly adaptable and "can survive nearly anywhere," feeding off wasps, flies, beetles and other insects that act as [natural](#) pollinators, he told AFP.

And "a certain generalised panic" has led to "absurd" measures, he said, like homemade traps of sugary concoctions that have little effect on the Asian queen bee but are lethal for native species.

Some of these poisons were killing 100 to 1,000 domestic bees, wasps or other pollinators for every one egg-laying hornet, he said.

In the search for a solution, biologist Darrouzet said the IRBI last year discovered an aggressive little fly larvae "like something out of the film 'Alien' ", where extraterrestrial creatures destroyed their victims from

inside.

Called *Conops Vesicularis*, the parasite is deposited on the hornet queen's belly and once hatched, devours her. Studies are still underway on this and other parasites but Darrouzet is cautious about banking on such "biological warfare".

He has more confidence in another deterrent he is testing that he said—without elaborating—would be 100 percent selective in killing only Asian hornets.

This trap could be ready by 2015, according to the biologist.

"Nature is taking its course ... natural predators will emerge," said exterminator Roumailhac.

© 2014 AFP

Citation: France fights back Asian hornet invader (2014, August 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-france-asian-hornet-invader.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.