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First Murder hornet found to have 200 queens capable of spawning new nests

Washington state scientists found about 500 live specimens in various stages of development inside the basketball-sized nest

When scientists in Washington state destroyed the first nest of so-called murder hornets found in the US, they discovered about 500 live specimens in various stages of development, officials said Tuesday.

Among them were nearly 200 queens that had the potential to start their own nests, said Sven-Erik Spichiger, an entomologist leading the fight to kill the hornets.

“We got there just in the nick of time,” he said.

'They give me the willies': scientist who vacuumed murder hornets braces for fight

Still, that didn't end the threat from the giant insects that can deliver painful, though rarely deadly, stings to people and wipe out entire hives of honeybees.

Scientists think other nests already exist and say it's impossible to know if any queens escaped before the first nest was destroyed.

Asian giant hornets, an invasive pest not native to the US, are the world's largest hornet at 2in (5 cm) long, and a predator of other insects, including the honeybees that pollinate many of the crops in Washington's multi-billion-dollar agriculture industry.

Despite their nickname and the hype that has stirred fears in an already bleak year, the hornets kill at most a few dozen people a year in Asian countries, and experts say it's probably far fewer. By comparison, hornets, wasps and bees typically found in the US kill an average of 62 people a year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said.

The first murder hornet nest – found in a tree and destroyed in late October in Whatcom county, along the Canadian border – was about the size of a basketball. It was located after state scientists trapped several hornets and attached radio trackers to some of them using dental floss.

Inside, researchers found:

- 190 total larvae that developed from eggs.
- 108 pupae, the next stage after larvae. They were nearly all queens.
- 112 workers, which included 85 workers previously vacuumed out of the nest.
- 76 queens, nearly all of them virgin queens. New queens emerge from the nest, mate and then leave to find a place to spend winter and later start a new colony.

Most of the specimens were still alive when the nest was opened, according to the Washington state department of agriculture, which plans to continue trapping the hornets for at least three more years to determine whether the area is free of them.

The first Asian giant hornet was found in the state a year ago and the first was trapped in July. Several more were later caught in Whatcom county. Murder hornets also have been found in British Columbia, Canada.

Spichiger said it was impossible to determine how the hornets got to the area, but the goal was to wipe them out before they get established and spread.