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Rochester Sentinel Article

Jekyll and Hyde

In 1886, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote about the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The drinking of a serum converted the good Dr. Jekyll into the evil Mr. Hyde. There are a variety of plants and insects that I think of that fall into the category of, “what started out good but eventually turned evil”.

Yellow Jackets would be first on my list. In the spring, the nest will start with a single female wasp that was fertilized last fall. What she started in spring, by fall may contain a thousand wasps. At first, they have a hunger for a protein diet, so the non-fertile females being produced by the queen, are out searching for other insects such as flies and caterpillars. They chew these up and feed them to the developing larva in the nest. These females will feed themselves upon plant nectar. Essentially, they start out in low numbers as fairly tame good guys.

As the summer goes on, and the nest grows larger, new wasps are produced as old ones die. Towards fall, some of those larvae develop as males, who will mate with the females, who in turn are going to overwinter to start next year’s generation. As the nest continues to enlarge there is more and more larva to feed. With this increased demand the available insects for food numbers decrease. At this time the overcrowded colony also starts to have a breakdown in their social structure.

Mr. Hyde emerges as they develop both aggression and a sweet tooth. Now, sugar appeals to them in the form of sugary drinks, overripe fruit, and assorted trashcan treats. This is when the trouble starts because you will also find humans around those items.

Most people do not know how to behave around yellow jackets. If a curious one approaches and the person starts flailing their arms at them, well frankly, the yellow jacket, like most of us, become annoyed at all the thrashing about their face. They defend themselves and sting. They can, just like Muhamad Ali used to say, “Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.” They are quicker than you. Yellowjackets alone are responsible for about one-half of all human insect stings.

Leave them alone or take the time to find where they are nesting. If it is the siding of your house you need to take swift action, by puffing some of the insecticide, Sevin dust into the hole at dusk. Never plug the hole as you will have a house full of yellow jackets searching for a way out. As fall progresses and the days become colder, all the yellow jacket nests will die out for the winter. The next year another promising life will begin anew until a new aggressive personality emerges.

I think the life story of a yellow jacket could make a great novel, it would be full of innocence, life changes, survival at the expense of others, personality changes, and to the unsuspecting human target the suspense of not knowing what and where an evil, painful and potentially dangerous stinger is lurking. Nobody can write a novel like Mother Nature.

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