



## Honey bee swarms

Honey bee swarming usually occurs on warm sunny days, most often in late spring and early summer in New York State. It is a natural phenomenon that allows honey bee colonies to reproduce. Under the right environmental and colony conditions, the queen leaves the hive with 40-70% of her offspring. This group of thousands of bees temporarily cluster on a tree branch, in a bush, or on another structure, where they remain while they make a collective decision selecting where their new nest site will be. A swarm cluster is usually about the size of a soccer ball but can be larger or smaller. Typically, bees are flying to and from the cluster, which can remain in one spot for anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Once they choose their new home, they take off together and fly to it, possibly several miles away. While a swarm is clustered is the best time the colony can be caught by a beekeeper. Reporting a swarm should be done as soon as possible.

**If you spot a swarm of honey bees, please contact a beekeeper in this directory.**

There are over 150 beekeepers in New York who are trained to safely remove swarms. Beekeepers help assure the honey bees will find a home in an apiary rather than a farm building, home, or other structure. They care for these honey bees and give them the best chance of survival. Honey bees face many stress factors here in New York State, so calling a swarm catcher instead of a pest controller can help preserve these colonies.



Honey bee swarm. Photo by David Hopkins.



Beekeeper retrieving a swarm. Photo by David Hopkins.

## What should I do if I see a swarm?

First, do not approach the swarm. Although honey bee swarms are typically very docile, there is always a risk to being stung. Instead, it is best to observe from a distance while noting the following characteristics of the swarm:

1. Approximately how big is it? For example, is it the size of a grapefruit? A basketball?
2. What color are the bees?
3. On what structure are they clustered? How high up is the swarm?
4. Do you see any nesting material, or only bees?
5. How long have you noticed it has been there?

If you are able to safely do so, it is very helpful to take a photo of the swarm. Many swarm catchers ask for a description or a photo so that they can verify that these insects are indeed honey bees.

Second, use this directory to find the swarm catchers in your county and who will visit your region. Call more than one swarm catcher if you do not get through to one immediately. Because swarms can depart in as little as a few hours, time is of the essence. Offer to email or text a photo to the swarm catcher. This will help them prepare their equipment and strategy. It is important to discuss ahead of time with beekeepers what you can expect of their visit, when they plan to arrive, if they will require trimming your vegetation, and if there is a cost associated with their visit.



## Some beekeepers remove established honey bee colonies, wasp nests, and carpenter bees

Many beekeepers in this list will also remove wasp nests or carpenter bees and will perform extractions of nuisance honey bees. The latter is a process where a beekeeper removes an established honey bee colony from a structure. If a swarm decides your house walls or shed will be a nice home, the bees will begin to build comb and live there. Beekeepers who perform extractions (“cut-outs”) will remove these bees and their nesting material. It is critical that the nesting material and honey is removed along with the bees. If it is left there, it will attract insect and rodent pests and will cause moisture issues in time. The directory will inform you whether the beekeeper is skilled at performing extractions or removing wasps, in addition to catching swarms.



Please refrain from spraying honey bees with pesticides. If extermination is absolutely required, it is prudent to ask the pest controller for the use of a vacuum hose and/or a non-toxic killing agent such as soapy water.

Following an extermination, it is necessary to remove the dead bees and debris of the colony to avoid attracting future swarms, pests, or damaging components of the building. The complexity of extractions varies. Each situation is unique, deserving of an individual strategy, and often requires more than one visit from the extractor. It generally involves opening a building to remove the bees and debris. Some extractors repair the building afterward, while others do not.

## Distinguishing honey bees from other insects



There are a number of wasps and bees that are easily mistaken for honey bees. It is important for the swarm catcher or exterminator to know the species involved. Some beekeepers in the directory are capable of removing a variety of species.

Honey bee swarms are a collection of thousands of bees that gather in a tight cluster. These bees are brown and black in color and are fuzzy. They have not created any nesting material. The following photos are of honey bee swarms settled on various structures.



Honey bee (top left). Photo by Lucinda VanVleck. Honey bee swarms (bottom left, middle, and right). Left swarm photo by Emma Mullen, middle and right swarm photo by Lucinda VanVleck.

If honey bees have decided to make a home of your house or shed, they will begin constructing beeswax hexagonal cells and will fill these cells with honey, pollen, and immature bees. These colonies are considered “established”. A beekeeper who performs extractions is needed in these cases. Honey bee colonies live in existing cavities. They do not live in the ground and they do not create paper or mud nests.



Established honey bee colony with beeswax. Photo by Lucinda VanVleck.



Established honey bee colony. Photo by Lucinda VanVleck.

Wasps are often confused with bees, but they can be recognized by their different physical appearance and their nests. Unlike honey bees, wasps are almost completely hairless. Their coloration is typically combinations of yellow and black, white and black, or orange and black. Their families are not as large as honey bees, and can range from a few individuals to hundreds. They often live in paper nests made of a gray, papery material, in mud nests, or in the ground. The following photos are of some wasps and their nests.



Yellowjacket. Photo by Emma Mullen.



Paper wasp nest. Photo by Emma Mullen.



Paper wasp. Photo by Emma Mullen

New York State is home to 417 species of bees! Common bees that are confused with honey bees include carpenter bees, bumble bees, or ground-nesting bees. Large carpenter bees are big fuzzy bees, yellow and black in color, with shiny black abdomens. They drill holes in wood and nest inside these small cavities. Bumble bees are primarily yellow and black fuzzy bees and nest in the ground. Ground nesting bees live in bare ground. All of these bees pose very little risk of stinging; none are defensive toward humans unless they are provoked. They are all important pollinators.



Bumble bee. Photo by Emma Mullen.



Ground nesting bee. Photo by Chris Kitchen.



Carpenter bee. Photo by Emma Mullen

## Do you want to be added to our directory?

Are you a swarm catcher, a wasp-remover, or someone who performs extractions? Join our directory! Email us at [dycebees@cornell.edu](mailto:dycebees@cornell.edu) so we can learn more about you. We're always happy to answer your questions at this email address.