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How Aussies put the sting on a stripey pest

An army of keen-eyed Australian families has helped notch up a vital victory in the never-ending war on a ferocious and painful invader.

European wasps have been consistently exterminated from the pleasant homes, gardens, farms and parks of Perth, Western Australia, in the process demonstrating the effectiveness of a national defence approach to dealing with damaging invaders.

“We’re absolutely delighted how effective the wasp control in WA has been,” says Cooperative Research Centre for National Plant Biosecurity (CRCNPB) Chairman, Professor John Lovett. “Essentially, like the famous Coastwatch in World War II, it is about ordinary Australians who keep their eyes peeled for signs of invasion. We can then send in the ‘troops’ to defeat it.”

The stripey, aggressive European wasp (*Vespula germanica*) was first detected in Tasmania in 1959, then crossed to mainland Australia in 1977. It has since become established in South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.

The wasp also showed up in Perth for the first time in 1977, and has done so almost every year since, hitching rides on cargo from the Eastern States.

But in WA, every single one of its nests has been wiped out.

If even one survived, it would breed queens in their thousands, enough to populate the whole State with wasps, a CRCNPB report has found.

“It’s all down to a combination of brilliant surveillance work – by the biosecurity experts in the Department of Agriculture and Food of Western Australia (DAFWA), and by ordinary citizens and householders who have maintained unrelenting vigilance for over thirty years,” says CRCNPB Chief Executive Officer, Dr Simon McKirdy.

The success of the campaign to keep the wasps at bay relies on two of their most notable features – their brilliant yellow-and-black stripes, which make them easy to spot, and their addiction to sweet things, which makes them easy to trap.

“Their distinctive markings make it easy even for children to recognise and dob in a wasp,” says Dr McKirdy. “At the same time Western Australia has run a very effective targeted trapping campaign across the city, which gives early warning of fresh incursions or possible

overwintering nests. This combination of the two has successfully prevented wasps getting a foothold in the state.”

There is convincing scientific evidence that the wasp is being continually re-introduced to Perth from reservoir populations in other parts of Australia - but that all its nests are detected and wiped out by the end of every summer by the vigilant West Australians, Dr McKirdy says.

Public awareness around wasps consists of a coordinated program of newspaper and radio advertising, brochures and a telephone hotline. The call centre provides free educational materials, specimen identification and advice on numerous pests and diseases that affect industry, homes, gardens, parks and the community. It is staffed by technicians backed by expert entomologists, horticulturalists and other specialists

“A research project undertaken by the CRC to examine surveillance activities across Australia identified this biosecurity program as a model for the whole of Australia in how to spot, contain and wipe out the new invasions of plant, disease and insect pests which we know are already heading our way,” Dr McKirdy says.

Professor Lovett adds. “The price of freedom from pests is eternal vigilance – and the West Aussies have proved it.”

“This is an issue where we need all the help we can get from the Australian community. Biosecurity experts are too thin on the ground to protect our huge continent, with all its industries and communities, on their own.

“Australia needs forty million eyeballs, constantly on the lookout for trouble.”

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