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In Japan, the 'Murder Hornet' Is Both a Lethal Threat and a Tasty Treat

Long before the insects found their way to American shores, some Japanese prized them for their numbing crunch and the venomous buzz they add to liquor.



By Ben Dooley

May 5, 2020

TOKYO — Long before the Asian giant hornet began terrorizing the honeybees of Washington State, the ferocious insects posed a sometimes lethal threat to hikers and farmers in the mountains of rural Japan.

But in the central Chubu region, these insects — sometimes called "murder hornets" — are known for more than their aggression and excruciating sting. They are seen as a pleasant snack and an invigorating ingredient in drinks.

The giant hornet, along with other varieties of wasps, has traditionally been considered a delicacy in this rugged part of the country. The grubs are often preserved in jars, pan-fried or steamed with rice to make a savory dish called hebo-gohan. The adults, which can be two inches long, are fried on skewers, stinger and all, until the carapace becomes light and crunchy. They leave a warming, tingling sensation when eaten.

The hornets can also give liquor an extra kick. Live specimens are drowned in shochu, a clear distilled beverage. In their death throes, the insects release their venom into the liquid, and it is stored until it turns a dark shade of amber.

The real thrill, however, is not in the eating or drinking of the giant hornet, but in the hunt.

Setting out in the early summer months, intrepid hunters track the insects to their huge nests, which can house as many as a thousand hornets and their larvae, in the boles of rotting trees or underground. They lure a hornet with a streamer attached to a piece of fish, and when it grabs the morsel and takes off, the hunting party goes on a steeplechase through the woods. Upon finding the nest, the hunters stun the insects with smoke, then use chain saws and shovels to extract it.

In other cases, the nests are rooted out by professional exterminators. Torao Suzuki, 75, said he removed 40 to 50 nests a year, getting stung as many as 30 times each season. "It hurts, it swells and it turns red, but that's about it," he said about the stings. "I guess I'm immune."



In the United States the first Asian giant hornets were spotted last fall in northwestern Washington State. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

He does not eat the bugs himself. "Even when I tell people, they're going to sting you, they still eat them. They say it makes them potent," he said.

Mr. Suzuki said he also sold the nests, which are popular trophies throughout the region. Lacquered brown hives, sometimes cut open to expose their complex lattice work, adorn vestibules and reception rooms in homes, schools and public offices.

Historians say the insects, which range throughout Asia but are found most commonly in Japan, were once valued along with other wasps as a cheap source of protein in poverty-stricken rural areas.

The cuisine is celebrated each November in Gifu Prefecture at a festival, known as the Kushihara Hebo Matsuri, where prizes are handed out for the largest nests, and gourmands bid for the privilege of taking one home with them.

Even at this insect jubilee, the danger posed by the giant hornet, which has killed dozens of people in Japan in recent years, is evident. A flyer for the 2018 event warned participants to be on the lookout for hornets on the loose near the fairgrounds, advising attendees to “please take ample care to avoid being stung.” Organizers, it added, “bear absolutely no responsibility” for the consequences of ignoring the warnings.

The admonitions go well beyond this single event. Every spring, government offices across the country issue advisories about the bugs, known in Japan as “giant sparrow hornets” because of their size. People venturing into the wild have learned to avoid hair spray and perfume, which can attract the frightening pests.

So it may be no surprise that the practice of hunting and eating the insects, as with many traditions in aging rural Japan, is less common than it used to be.

The Oomachi Wasp Appreciation Society in Nagano once achieved some measure of national fame for making rice crackers with the insects baked in. Production has since stopped, as the group’s members have died or become too old to make the snacks, said Sachiko Murayama, 70, who is on the board of a local business cooperative.

In Japanese cities, however, there has been a small resurgence in interest in eating bugs. Some young people are attracted to the novelty, and to the idea that insects are an environmentally friendly source of protein.

In Tokyo, the giant hornet is on the menu at more than 30 restaurants.



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Shota Toguchida, who owns a Chinese restaurant in the city, said he sold shots of homemade hornet liquor for 2,000 yen, or about $19, mostly to middle-aged men.

He keeps a few bottles on the bar. “It looks surprising, but tastes great,” he said.

In the United States, where the first Asian giant hornets were spotted last fall in northwestern Washington State and scientists are urgently trying to hunt them down, no one is thinking about the insects’ culinary potential. The focus is solely on eradicating them before they can spread and wipe out bee populations.

Takatoshi Ueno, an entomologist at Kyushu University, said he was mystified by the hornet’s appearance on the American West Coast.

“It’s impossible for them to fly over from Asia,” he said, adding that they most likely came over in a shipping container. Even that, though, would be extraordinarily unlikely, he said, given their extreme aggression, which would have almost certainly drawn the attention of a ship’s crew.

They might not have come from Japan, Dr. Ueno said; they could have arrived from another country in the region. But regardless of how they arrived in Washington State, he added, it is critical that they be dealt with before they have a chance to establish themselves.

“When dealing with invasive species, whether a virus or an insect, it’s the same,” he said. “Moving quickly to completely destroy them is the best. Ultimately, it’s the cheapest and least damaging.”

For any adventurous eaters in the Pacific Northwest who might be tempted to track down and sample the species, Dr. Ueno strongly warns against it. Encounters with the insect are not for the faint of heart, he said.

“Americans have probably never seen such a large hornet,” he said, adding that “some of them might faint dead away.”

Hisako Ueno and Makiko Inoue contributed reporting.