

Washington's first 'zombie bees' appear

The insects act erratically after succumbing to a parasitical fly

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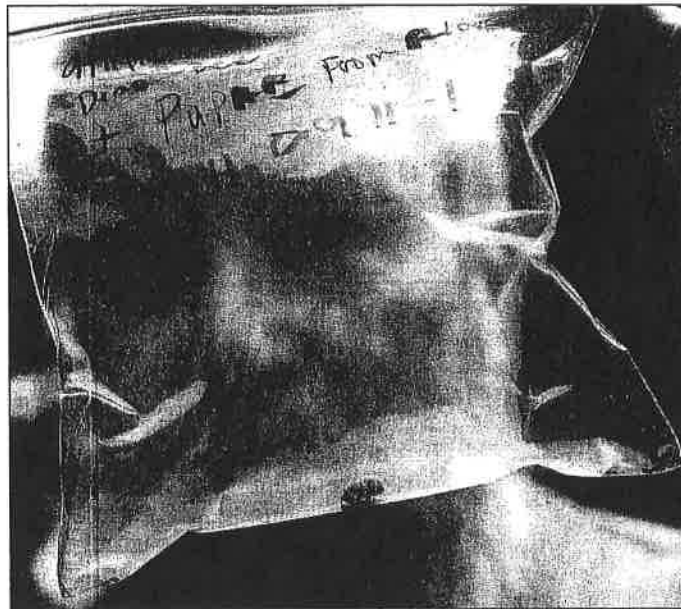
SEATTLE — The infection is as grim as it sounds: "Zombie bees" have a parasite that causes them to fly at night and lurch around erratically until they die.

And experts say the condition has crept into Washington state.

"I joke with my kids that the zombie apocalypse is starting at my house," said Mark Hohn, a novice beekeeper who spotted the infected insects at his suburban Seattle home.

Hohn returned from vacation a few weeks ago to find many of his bees either dead or flying in jerky patterns and then flopping on the floor.

He remembered hearing about zombie bees, so he collected several of the corpses and popped them into a plastic bag. About



ELLEN M. BANNER/The Seattle Times

Mark Hohn, a novice beekeeper in Kent, holds up a plastic bag with a dead zombie bee and pupae.

a week later, the Kent man had evidence his bees were infected: the pupae of parasitic flies.

"Curiosity got the better of me," Hohn said.

The zombie bees were the first to be confirmed in Washington state, The Seattle Times reported.

San Francisco State

University biologist John Hafernik first discovered zombie bees in California in 2008.

Hafernik now uses a website to recruit citizen scientists like Hohn to track the infection across the country.

Observers also have found zombie bees in Or-

egon and South Dakota.

The infection is another threat to bees that are needed to pollinate crops. Hives have been failing in recent years due to a mysterious ailment called colony collapse disorder, in which all the adult honey bees in a colony suddenly die.

The life cycle of the fly that infects zombie bees is reminiscent of the movie "Alien." A small adult female lands on the back of a honeybee and injects eggs into the bee's abdomen. The eggs hatch into maggots.

"They basically eat the insides out of the bee," Hafernik said.

After consuming their host, the maggots pupate, forming a hard outer shell that looks like a fat, brown grain of rice.

That's what Hohn found in the plastic bag with the dead bees. Adult flies emerge in three to four weeks.

Once more people start looking, the number of sightings will probably climb, Hohn said.