

Conservation Corner

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Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home
Your house is on fire and your children gone.
All except one, and that's little Anne,
For she has crept under the warming pan.



Ladybugs – familiar, pretty, and beneficial – are one of nature's most-loved and popular insects. Also known as lady beetles or ladybird beetles, their name originated in the Middle Ages when European farmers prayed to the Virgin Mary to save their crops. They named the beetles that arrived and devoured the aphids “Beetle of Our Lady” in her honor. Ladybugs are still considered a symbol of good luck in many cultures around the world.

Ladybugs, of course, are not true bugs but rather beetles, that large order of insects whose members account for one out of every four creatures on Earth. Most ladybugs have oval, dome-shaped bodies with six short legs and two short antennae. They may be bright yellow, red, or orange and may come with or without black spots or stripes.

Worldwide, over 5,000 species of ladybugs have been classified. Of the 46 genera and 400 North American species, only 3 species feed on plants, 3 others feed on fungal spores, and all the rest feed on soft-bodied insects such as aphids and scale insects. Did you know that one ladybug can eat up to 5,000 insects in its lifetime or that NASA has sent ladybugs and aphids into space to see how they interact in zero gravity?

Here on Earth, ladybugs are happy in many different habitats including grasslands, forests, cities, suburbs, and along rivers. Ladybugs lay their eggs in clusters or rows on the underside of leaves where aphids have gathered. The larva grows quickly, shedding its skin several times before attaching to a leaf by its tail and pupating for a week before emerging as an adult ladybug. Active from spring until fall, ladybugs hibernate over winter in warm, secluded places. Perhaps you've come across their colonies – thousands of ladybugs piled under a log or tree bark.

A common question is “Why do ladybugs have spots?” Scientists believe their spots and bright body colors help ward off predators such as frogs, wasps, spiders, and dragonflies. That color combination of black and red or orange is known as aposematic coloration and serves as a natural warning signal that clearly says “I taste terrible, eat something else.” While harmless to humans, the oily, foul-tasting fluid ladybugs secrete when threatened may be toxic to some animals.



Spots are also a handy tool to help identify various ladybug species. Iowa is home to over 100 species of ladybugs, including the 7-spotted ladybug. Today, though, our most common ladybug is the multi-colored Asian ladybeetle. Ranging in color from yellow to orange to red with 0-19 black spots or black with white spots, they were first introduced as a biological control in 1916 and again in 1978-81. Although never released in Iowa, multi-colored Asian ladybeetles are now permanent, valuable residents of our state. At times, though, especially on warm October afternoons, I still wish they would all “fly away home.”