

OUTDOORS

It's a ladybug picnic

We recently had a spell of warm weather well into October, which compels humans in this climate to get outside and prepare for winter: getting the summer fixtures put away, turning over the garden and getting Christmas lights up before everything is covered in snow. While we're doing all this, the same weather is compelling a certain variety of bug to do the opposite: prepare for winter by getting inside by any means possible.



SARAH MORRIS

That's right, outdoor lovers, it's ladybug weather!

I should begin by clarifying that "ladybug" is a colloquial or common term most people use for any insect in the Coccinellidae family. Entomologists prefer the terms "ladybird beetle" or "lady beetle" as, for reasons we don't have room to get into here, ladybugs aren't technically "bugs." The ones that literally plague us every fall are Asian lady beetles, but unless you're an insect professional it's completely correct to refer to them and their native, bright red cousins as ladybugs.

About 25 years ago I was living in Wausau. On a warm, bright October day following a hard freeze, I saw the entire south side of my house coated in large, orange ladybugs. This was the first time I remember seeing the annual invasion. They had a wider variety of colors and more spots than any ladybugs I'd seen. I'd also never seen ladybugs in a giant swarm before, and it turns out the Asian variety has a lot of different habits than their native relatives, ones that make them much less popular with humans.

They congregate in large



Image by Myriams-Fotos from Pixabay

numbers in the fall and seek out places to overwinter, usually in spaces in walls. And they're attracted to light colors, so if you have a pale color to your siding, congratulations! You're hosting a party. Unlike American ladybugs, these little guys will bite you if they feel threatened (actually, they pinch with their mandibles) and worst of all emit a smelly, yellow fluid from their leg joints as a defense mechanism (This also keeps them from having a lot of natural predators, including my cats who are very interested in them until they get close enough to smell them). They also will leave a nasty stain on your walls or ceiling if you

swat them. They won't do any active damage to your home: they don't chew, bore holes or eat anything. What they will do is pile up in the walls and windowsills, and dust mites attracted to dead bugs may cause trouble for allergy sufferers. And then, in the spring, the warm bright weather gets them moving again, often into the interior of your home.

These little invaders were introduced both intentionally and accidentally according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture; farmers released them as a pest-control measure and they also have been found around ports. While they're generally considered invasive, they are also consid-

ered beneficial and have led to reductions in pesticide use in some areas where aphids are a threat to agriculture. (Wine and juice producers, who have to contend with these stink-bugs getting into the mix, are not fans).

The research I could find online shows little to no correlation between declines in native ladybug populations and the presence of Asian ladybugs. Perhaps most encouraging is the fact that, over the past several years, the size of the swarms seems to be diminishing here in the Northland at least. I haven't had to suck them up with a Shop-Vac for several years now. Hopefully this means that there are some

natural checks and balances that are catching up with them and helping control their population.

Caulking any exterior openings in your home will help keep them out, and will keep out much nastier bugs like wasps and hornets. As for me, I'm willing to coexist with the little suckers. They've become one of those iconic signals of the change in seasons, and those last warm sunny days of autumn just wouldn't be the same without them any more.

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UP NORTH

Making a spectacle of thievery

The intent was not to keep the blue jay and squirrel stocked with corn. It just happened because that's what the scarecrow offered — one corncob in each hand, as long as I kept replacing them when the kernels disappeared. Back then I wasn't happy with having to replace the corn-cobs every day.

The blue jay and squirrel were not my best friends, but they apparently were pretty cozy with the tin man in bib overalls.

Times have changed. Fast forward 10 years, and now in my more tranquil autumn I have legalized corn for the birds and critters. I provide the cobs and watch the diners whirl and twirl on the lower branches of the maple tree. There are several blue jays and even more squirrels. The acrobatics, along with jostling for control of the cob, are constant. Birds and bushy tails wheel about and hang on for dear corn to pick kernels off the cobs, which are twisted onto screws poking through the bottom of a platform feeder.

The scarecrow, meanwhile, has moved across the street, to the neighbor lady's yard. So I can still see it, dressed in

farmer garb — the same flannel shirt and blue bibs that my wife put on it all those years ago. But it no longer holds out corncobs; it just stands guard in the garden.

I remember when my wife and I carried the metal scarecrow out of a country primitives shop. The head and hands were — still are — held together by heavy metal bars. It has arms but no legs, unless you count the one bar extended down to keep the scarecrow upright. The face is rust-colored, as if the tin farmer has spent too many years in the sun and wind.

We found that one of the tin man's fingers on each hand was sharp enough to hold a corn cob. Teamed with a pumpkin, the scarecrow stood tight against our deck railing, a bit out of our window view so we didn't immediately know who was stealing corn. Who was the kernel cobbler?

Then one day I saw a squirrel scampering across the deck railing as a flash of blue and gray descended from the steely October sky. It landed on the scarecrow. It was a blue jay, and it wasn't scared. It perched atop the farmer's shoul-



A blue jay cobs a kernel from columnist Dave Greschner's feeder.

DAVE GRESCHNER PHOTO

der and pecked away at his tasty hands.

These days we've all found our place. The scarecrow protects the neighbor's garden with-

out interference from birds and squirrels, who now feed freely in my tree. I have a front row seat for the corn dinner show. Then it occurs to

me that now I'm the only thief; I clobbered the cobs from a neighbor's field.

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