

# NatureNotes



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world  
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## Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home...

**Ladybird, ladybird fly away home,  
Your house is on fire and your children are gone,  
All except one,  
And her name is Ann,  
And she hid under the baking pan.**

**From Tom Thumb's Pretty Songbook Vol.2 (London, 1744)**

I expect most of us have come across this children's nursery rhyme at sometime but I was reminded of it recently as I cleared my vegetable patch for planting. I noticed that the, as yet, un-weeded half of the bed was covered with ladybirds, little bright red and orange droplets on the bright green foliage. I downed tools and swung into 'Gerald Durrell mode', peering at the little creatures, my face only inches away.

It wasn't long before I had examined at least ten little bugs and each one was different from the other, sometimes subtly with slightly fewer spots and sometimes dramatically.

One individual was the complete reverse of the standard red background with black spots, sporting a black background with red spots.

It seemed too much of a shame to clear the ladybirds' sunbed from beneath them so I went and got my camera instead.

Encountering these familiar little insects gave me an inkling as to how the nursery rhyme might have come about. Its origins are the subject of much debate – ranging from pre-medieval admonitions to pagans to flee before being driven out by the advance of Christianity, to medieval farmers who, having released thousands of ladybirds to protect their crops from pests in the spring, would then drive them off before burning the stubble after the harvest.

Whatever the truth about the origins of the rhyme, whenever we encounter these pretty little bugs, I think they seem to engender a desire in us to protect them.

Because we so often come across them where we live and work, maybe in the kitchen at home, we are apt to encourage



Harlequin ladybird.

Picture: STEVE ROUND

the ladybird to "fly away home" to safety. Not so much grace is afforded spiders!

However, my illusions of an entirely innocent species that seems only to delight little children and eat its way through the destructive aphids hoards on my vegetables were about to be undone.

On examining my photos and comparing the photographed ladybirds with an online identification sheet I realized that most of the ladybirds I had found were one specific ladybird species: the harlequin ladybird.

This innocent-looking little bug is actually the fastest invading species in the UK to date – outpacing the spread of other invaders such as grey squirrels, ring-necked parakeets and American mink. Not only that but, with its cannibalistic tendencies, the harlequin ladybird has, scientists say, been responsible for the decline of seven native species.

Originating in Asia, the harlequin ladybird was introduced to Europe as a biological pest control for arable crops but within one decade spread to all corners of the UK.

Discovery of the rapid advance of this one species of ladybird prompted a nationwide survey that encouraged members of the

public to submit any sightings to a central database in the hope that the impact of this new arrival on our native wildlife could be monitored.

Over 10 years on and the verdict is not all bad. Like the other 45 native UK ladybird species, the harlequin ladybird helpfully preys on a variety of plant-damaging smaller insects.

It seems also that some of our native insects have developed an appetite for the new arrival, helping to keep harlequin numbers at bay. Unlike the invasive Japanese knotweed – which cost the UK economy just under £1.7 million in 2010 – the harlequin ladybird has been a far less costly invader.

This massive silent invasion, right under our noses, intrigues me and only serves to illustrate the rapidly changing world of nature all around us. The naturalist Gerald Durrell was right to be fascinated by these tiny worlds within worlds for each has a story to tell.

I at least can clear the remainder of my vegetable patch with less guilt now I know the shaky credentials of the ladybirds in my garden!

**For more information on ladybirds or to submit your sightings please visit: [www.ladybird-survey.org](http://www.ladybird-survey.org)**