

BOOK REVIEW

ACORN, J. 2007. **Ladybugs of Alberta: Finding the Spots and Connecting the Dots.** University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (www.uap.ualberta.ca). 169 pp. ISBN 978-0-88864-381-0. \$29.95 CAD

John Acorn's *Ladybugs of Alberta* is an elegantly produced and welcome addition to the bookshelf of popular guides on Coleoptera. It is beautifully designed, printed on glossy and durable paper stock, robustly perfect-bound, and printed in color throughout. There are many excellent photographs (mostly taken by Acorn) and color drawings of each species (although uncredited, I take it that these are also by the author). The layout and design of the book is clear, well considered, and engaging. At 6" × 9" trim-size it is plausibly "field-guide" sized, yet attractive enough that it could pass as a coffee-table book. All in all, this book is a notable achievement.

There are several introductory chapters, accounts of each of the 75 species of Coccinellidae found in Alberta, a checklist of species, a glossary of terms, a list of a few helpful sources, and a list of references. The "What is a Ladybug?" chapter gives a brief introduction to lady beetles (including Acorn's somewhat unusual "taste-testing" of coccinellids) while the "Life of a Ladybug" chapter does a creditable job of introducing coccinellid biology, physiology, development, and ecology. There is a chapter on coccinellid research in Alberta, which is interesting and informative. The lack of an editor (see below) is apparent, however, in various misplaced elements such as a table of linear regression statistics for a prior study, injected by Acorn in the book for "posterity," and the formal description the larva of *Coccinella alta*, which ought have been published in a scientific journal rather than in a popular field guide.

Acorn ducks the opportunity to call coccinellids "lady beetles" writing that, "it is silly to try to re-educate Albertans, who almost universally call them ladybugs," although, of course, he is attempting to re-educate them on many other matters in the book, and presumably those who would be interested enough to purchase it would be amenable to at least consider such a "re-education."

It is, however, in the chapter "Introduced Ladybugs and Conservation" (and in his preface to the book) that Acorn is on much shakier ground. It is a somewhat curious polemic, questioning concerns with respect to introduced species and their environmental consequences. He characterizes conservationists' concerns with respect to introduced species as being tied to "romantic-transcendental ... religious and cultural biases" in a "hopeless struggle against change ... toward a stabilist goal for the environment" based on naïve notions. Acorn is certainly correct in being critical of the excesses of invasion biology, with its vocabulary of "alien invaders" and its tendency to jump the gun and selectively over-react to introduced species without adequate evidence. Not all adventive species become invasive; however, few serious biologists take such a position. In quoting the hyperbole of an article in the Edmonton Journal newspaper, Acorn sets himself an easy mark – but one which has little relationship to science. Acorn has seemingly himself over-reacted and is ready to deploy too many sweeping conclusions.

Invasive species are indeed a complicated topic and to his credit Acorn marshals a considerable amount of information in the chapter. However, Acorn's position to "make peace with inevitable change" and make it "interesting and worthy of study" misses the harmful potential of actual invasive species, and hence the research and control measures that could be employed to respond to these.

In the species accounts presented by Acorn there are excellent photographs (or illustrations) of all the species. The etymology of each name is discussed, tips on identification are included, and there are general notes about each species. There is also a two-line rhyming verse for each species. These are sometimes mildly amusing; more frequently sophomoric or even cryptic ("The lady waved, and I waved back, the road was paved, and the cards were stacked" for *Hyperaspis undulata*; or "Disconotata, a most notable disco, is even more rare down in ol' San Francisco," for *Hyperaspis disconotata*). There are small range maps showing the distribution of species in North America (apparently adapted from Gordon [1976, 1985]), however, detailed maps of the Alberta distribution of species would also have been useful.

This is a popular book rather than one directed at a scientific audience, and as such it is often believed that an essential ingredient of these is the development and use of common names (witness recent popular guides on butterflies, tiger beetles, and dragonflies). While there is nothing wrong with this *per se*, there will be those who will take issue with Acorn for the occasionally eccentric and nonstandard use of such names in this book. For instance while *Harmonia axyridis* already has a number of well-established common names (Harlequin, southern, Asian, multicolored Asian), Acorn launches yet another; the “Halloween Ladybug” wishing to “avoid any resonance between nativism and racism”(?). *Psyllobora vigintimaculata*, correctly known as the “twenty-spotted lady beetle” is called instead the “Wee-tiny ladybug” by Acorn. *Hyperaspis consimilis* is Christened the “Poorly-known ladybug” by Acorn “in the hopes that we will soon learn more about it and need to change the name,” a very poor basis for the choice of a common name. “Once-squashed ladybug” is given to *Chiocorus hexacyclus* after the “chromosome squash” genetic technique. All nomenclature (Latin or colloquial) must serve the purposes of unambiguous communication. Hence adding even more common names to the popular roster, or selecting names for eccentric reasons, are not apt to serve this purpose.

There is no index to the book, nor are there keys to the identification of species. While I realize this is a popular book that does have excellent illustrations and does include identification notes, it would not at all have been remiss to include keys. While matching specimens to pictures may work in many instances, and some readers may have no interest in doing more than this, keys are an opportunity for amateurs to learn a slightly more rigorous mode of identification, particularly since (as Acorn himself points out) some species of coccinellines are notoriously polymorphic and efforts such as the Canadian Nature Federation’s Ladybug Survey (based solely on matching pictures) were largely undermined by the poor caliber of identification.

In general, this fine book could have benefited from an editor. Acorn is a fine raconteur and an engaging writer, but every author, no matter what their abilities, can benefit from independent perspective and razor-sharp eye of a good editor who can help bring balance, find inconsistencies, iron-out wrinkles, and bring some sober second-thought to ideas being presented. With the aforementioned caveats, I heartily recommend Ladybugs of Alberta as a worthwhile addition to any coleopterist’s bookshelf, and commend Acorn for this enthusiastic and worthwhile contribution to the study of lady beetles.

Literature Cited

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Christopher Majka, Nova Scotia Museum, 1747 Summer St., Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 3A6, CANADA, c.majka@ns.sympatico.ca

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