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Book Review: *Ladybugs of Alberta: Finding the Spots and Connecting the Dots* By John Acorn. Edmonton

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Ladybugs of Alberta: Finding the Spots and Connecting the Dots. By John Acorn. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007. xxix + 169 pp. Illustrations, photographs, appendices, references. C\$29.95 paper.

Only a few groups of insects, among all their immense diversity, have escaped the aversive response of most adults toward things with six legs and allowed nonbiologists to look on them with a more appreciative eye. With this publication, John Acorn has now given us a scientifically sound and entertaining view of three of the groups with this elevated status: butterflies, damselflies, and lady beetles. This new volume, like most of the animals it describes, is attractive as well as highly readable and informative.

This is much more than just a guide to identification of Coccinellidae in Alberta. It introduces the reader to the natural history of the group, to ecological aspects of invasive species, and to Acorn's slightly quirky sense of humor, along with providing excellent photographic illustrations (most by Acorn himself) of the various species and a convenient set of "galleries" allowing a quick comparison of what you might have found in your net (or in your bottle, or on your shirt). Although the title suggests the focus of the book is Alberta, Acorn's general chapters, and particularly the distribution maps showing all of North America, insure a broader appeal. Readers in the Great Plains states and prairie provinces will certainly find this a useful reference. The fact that this appears to be the first popular book treating this group in North America suggests it may gain an even wider audience. While online regional identification guides (like the University of Guelph's "Lady Beetles of Ontario") exist, they don't

tend to be nearly as easily accessible out in the field on a warm summer's day.

In addition to the identification guides, which include individual sections on each species, there are chapters dealing with what one might expect in a book like this—the life history of ladybugs, for example; but others give us a lot more flavor. “Ladybug Study in Alberta” not only introduces us to historical figures in Alberta entomology, such as E.H. Strickland, a mythic figure to those of us who learned much of our entomology here, but also to the present crop of enthusiasts, including recent graduate students, and professionals like Michael Majerus, who has used ladybirds (as the British refer to them) to examine aspects of mimicry and aposematism (warning coloration) and questions involving evolution and natural selection.

Other topics the author addresses will be of great interest to gardeners, naturalists, and simply the curious. Harvesting lady beetles and releasing them in your backyard probably accomplishes little beyond making you feel self-righteous, and may do more harm than good. Attempts at “citizen science,” in which the general public attempts identifications of a group like lady beetles, must have a foundation of solid professional taxonomic work and experts to be successful. As usual, Acorn has done a particularly good job of translating the dry prose of scientific literature to allow one to understand what has and hasn't been demonstrated through experimental work.

Even the book's subtitle, “Finding the Spots and Connecting the Dots,” gives you a pretty good idea that you'll find some entertainment as well as solid science here. Each species has a poetic couplet preceding the information about it. Some are really catchy, some thoroughly forced, but I have to confess that, while couplets like “I dreamed that I saw a nice *trifasciata*, / Stuck to the side of my sister's Miyata” reminded me of Ogden Nash or the Scottish poet McGonigle, they did tend to make me look forward to the next contribution.

I found the absence of an index mildly frustrating. In addition, I have never been a fan of inventing common names where they don't previously exist. Common species tend to get christened early; for those that aren't common, scientific binomials seem just as effective. At least Acorn's attempts don't seem quite as forced as those in some recent insect field guides, where the name offered could apply to several dozen similar species. Many of his suggested common names for tiger beetles, in one of his earlier books, have been accepted by workers in the field. He even attempts to rename species for which he feels the current common name is inappropriate. Hence, the multicolored Asian ladybug becomes the “Hallowe'en

ladybug.” At least there is a logical explanation for getting rid of that previous common name. On the other hand, his dismissal of “harlequin ladybug,” as the British call it, seems to be much less convincing.

Acorn's discussion of “Invasion Biology” and his recommendation that we “make peace with ecological change,” even rapid human-induced change, may be somewhat unpalatable (rather like the lady beetles of which he writes) to some readers, but he lays out his case eloquently (preface and chap. 4), leaving it to the reader to weigh those comments and decide to what extent ferreting out alien ladybugs in washups along lakes should raise one's blood pressure. Whether you agree or disagree, this is just another in a series of good reasons to own a copy of this book. **R.W. Longair**, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Calgary*.