

Britain's ladybirds face deadly invader

Francis Rowland reports on the latest alien species to threaten British wildlife.

Britain's ladybirds face a deadly rival this summer. The harlequin ladybird has arrived and it threatens to eat our favourite garden bug out of house and home.

The harlequin (*Harmonia axyridis*), also known as the multi-coloured Asian ladybird and the Halloween ladybird, was first discovered in an Essex pub garden in September 2004. It was sent to Michael Majerus, a leading ladybird expert for verification. A press release, sent out on 5 October, alerted people to its arrival, encouraging them to send in specimens. From this it was evident that the harlequin ladybird was already prevalent across south-east England, with particular concentrations of records in London, Essex and Kent.

The harlequin ladybird is used to control aphids and scale insects in commercial glasshouses, crops and gardens in Europe and elsewhere. It's already established in North America (where it's now the most widespread ladybird on the continent), Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Holland and Greece. In all these countries it overwinters in large numbers (often in houses) and has dramatically affected native species, becoming a serious nuisance.

The harlequin is an efficient predator and can easily out-compete our native ladybirds, and will eat their larvae too if it runs out of aphids.

Defra, through the National Biodiversity Network Trust, is funding the Harlequin Ladybird Survey to monitor its invasion and effect on native ladybirds and other insects that prey on aphids. The work is being done by the Biological Records Centre at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology Monks Wood, Anglia Polytechnic University and Cambridge University.

The survey relies on details of sightings sent in from the public. Please report any sightings of the harlequin ladybird (any plant, shrub or tree that has aphids will usually have ladybirds too), including where it was found (where possible a grid reference or postcode), the date and how many ladybirds were there. A photograph of the ladybird would also help verification of each find.

By May individual harlequins had been recorded in Devon and the Isle of White, which is pretty good going. We don't know how they got there... they could easily have flown/been blown there, or they could have come hidden in cut flowers or fresh vegetables from somewhere else.

Send in details of your sightings using the on-line recording form. The survey team has already received hundreds of records, both verified and unverified, as well as many more forms and specimens in the post.

The Biological Records Centre is also running a broader UK Ladybird Survey to monitor all 46 native ladybird species. To take part, go to www.ladybird-survey.org for forms to fill in and send.

Details can also be sent to the UK Ladybird Survey, Biological Records Centre, Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Monks Wood, Abbots Ripton, Cambridgeshire, PE28 2LS.

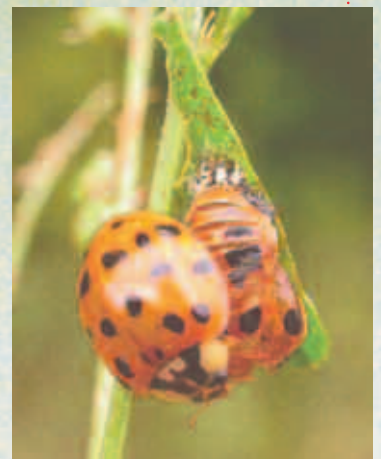


How to recognise the harlequin ladybird

The harlequin ladybird is rounder in shape and slightly larger than most British species – measuring between 5-8mm (1/4 inch). Colour patterns vary greatly, but most harlequin ladybirds found in Britain fall into three categories:

- orange with 15-20 spots
- black with two orange or red spots
- black with four orange or red spots

Just behind its head it has a white plate with a big black M-shaped marking on it.



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