

Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home

October 2005

*Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home,
Your house is on fire, and your children will burn.*

That old ditty came sadly true last Autumn, when I took the bucket off the top of our chimney in readiness for winter. There was a packed mass of Ladybirds in the bottom of the bucket. Alas, there were also clusters down out of reach in the gloom of the chimney, and when we lit our first fire we were rebuked with a shower of singed Ladybirds.

The rhyme is thought to have originated in the Kentish hop fields when the hop-vines were being burned at the end of the season, and has parallels in many languages. There are many folk tales and charms associated with these pretty little beetles and to harm them is unlucky. The name is a contraction of "Our Lady's Bird", and in France they are known as "Virgin's Beetles" and were looked on by the peasants as a cure for toothache.

An alternative rhyme, if spoken politely enough, should prompt the Ladybird to fly to one's sweetheart:

*Lady-bird, lady-bird, fly from my hands,
Tell me where my true love stands ...*

There are many types of Ladybird, which form the family Coccinellidae. The common European one has 7 spots, but ours is the Thirteen-spotted Ladybird (*Leis conformis*) – although the ones I found had closer to 20 spots.

Our Ladybirds are orange-yellow with black spots – other species are distinguished by different colours and numbers of spots or by other markings, but are nearly all brightly coloured and strongly patterned little beetles with a distinctive hemispherical shape.

