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## Ladybird, Ladybird, Save the Melon Crop and Growers Grow Rich

By Harold P. Beaumont

"Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home, Your house is on fire, your children alone."

**D**ID you ever sing that and then see the little creature unfold its tiny wings and depart from your outstretched hand? And did you ever wonder whether that little black spotted, scarlet clad creature was flying? Well, I'll let you into the secret, because official California has learned it. The ladybird was probably headed toward Humbug canyon!

Now, you think that's a joke, don't you? But there's where you're wrong, absolutely. Humbug canyon is the real name of a very real canyon far up in the California Sierras and it is the spot where the state goes first for its

annual crop of 90,000,000 ladybirds with which the plant lice are fought and millions of dollars saved to the fruit growers.

Why the ladybirds go there; why they bury themselves under several feet of snow, clinging together like a swarm of bees; how their nesting places are marked in the spring and thus relocated in the snowbanks in winter; how the mountain crews of the state insectary risk life and limb every winter; how ton after ton of squirming bugs is poured into gunny sacks and carried for miles on mule-back; how the insects are kept alive at Sacramento until the cry for help comes in the summer, and finally, how bug meets bug in the battle of the orchard and how the ladybird Joans of Arc of horticulture save the trees from predatory aphids—all this is the story of Humbug canyon.

Every ladybird is born with a spring chicken appetite for plant lice. These destroy melon vines, truck garden crops, apple, pear and prune orchards, and, in general, they are the meanest pest in the state.

In the Imperial valley whole fields of melons were ruined in three days by aphids, and no means of fighting them proved effective until the little ladybirds were brought to the rescue.

They proved to be the natural foe of the plant lice. They cleaned the melon fields as slick as a whistle, and then, with their food gone, they starved to death.

All over California the fruit growers began to cry for more ladybirds. E. K. Carnes, superintendent of the state insectary, was at his wits' end. He could not begin to supply the demand. Carnes sent out scores of men into the mountains to search for the little insect, and thus Humbug canyon was discovered. It takes 1,147 ladybirds to weigh one ounce. Carnes and the state insectary force are now distributing TONS of the little creatures, whose individual number are almost incomprehensible.

Humbug canyon is a chasm in the wilds of Sierra county. The floor of the canyon is carpeted thickly with pine needles, low shrubs and running water. The collectors first stumbled on the spot in the summer time, and there they found traces everywhere of the insects for which they were looking. But of the ladybirds themselves there was none—nothing but castoff shells. Other places were sought, but none showed such promise and yet crops, apple, pear and prune orchards, and, in general, they are the meanest pest in the state. Finally Carnes thought he had hit upon the key to the mystery. He marked the graves of the ladybirds with long stakes, and in the dead of winter he led into the Sierras a crew of trained mountaineers, equipped

with pack trains and all the necessities for facing real danger amidst the storms of the high altitudes.

Carnes and his men established a central camp as a basis of supplies, and, equipped with arctic clothing, they hit the trails for Humbug canyon. The paths were so precipitous that they were compelled to abandon their mules and "hoof it."

The tips of the stakes they had left greeted them above the snow when the explorers reached the ladybirds' nest. Carnes took shovel and snow-pick and the collectors started to find out whether his key to the riddle was the right one. Four feet under the snow one of the men suddenly came upon what looked like a peculiar snowball, with a nucleus of twigs and pine needles. The whole party watched while the mass was broken open. Then they tossed their hats and shouted with glee, for the mystery of Humbug canyon had been solved. The peculiar snowball was a squirming mass of thousands of ladybirds, clinging together like swarms of bees. That day 400 pounds of ladybirds were dug up from under the snow, packed into four sacks and carried down to where the mules had been left. From there they were sent by another pack train to the nearest railroad station and on to Sacramento, where the colonies were cleaned of debris and placed in cold storage, the same temperature as that in which they were found. By means of artificial winter the insects were kept alive in a hibernating condition, in some cases for seven months and 14 days, far longer than the natural winter period.

Great care had to be exercised, for if the temperature had been permitted to rise, even for a little while, or if moisture had come in contact with them, the mass of bugs would heat and cake and the entire colony would die.

Each year, now, the collectors go into the mountains early in the fall, before the snow, and they carefully mark the spots where the ladybirds are most likely to be found. Full information is then transcribed in a card index in the state insectary at Sacramento. This index is the state ladybug directory, with the street and house number and the probable number of families for every colony of Humbug canyon. That directory is mighty useful when the real work arrives during the winter months.

Two years ago one of the most expert of Carnes' assistants got caught in an unusually heavy storm and lost his way. He was without food or shelter for two days and nights and only succeeded in reaching the right trail by hanging to the tail of his mule and leaving his rescue to the animal's sense of direction.

So ladybird nesting is a perilous sport, and the men from the state insectary who go forth as recruiting officers to draft the legions which will fight the predatory aphids of the orchards are brave soldiers of the common good.

To them Humbug canyon is no joke.



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