

Bug of the Month

by Jim Revell

“3 for the price of 1”

Small Milkweed Bug ■ *Large Milkweed Bug* ■ *Boxelder Bug*

SMALL MILKWEED BUG

Class: Insecta (Insects)
Order: Hemiptera
Family: Lygaeidae
Genus: Lygaeus
Species: kalmii



LARGE MILKWEED BUG

Class: Insecta (Insects)
Order: Hemiptera
Family: Lygaeidae
Genus: Oncopeltus
Species: fasciatus



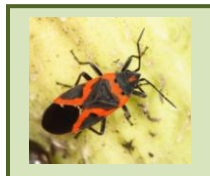
BOXELDER BUG

Class: Insecta (Insects)
Order: Hemiptera
Family: Rhopalidae
Genus: Boisea
Species: trivittata



While cleaning up the last few remaining winter leaves in one of my flower beds, I came across several individual Small Milkweed Bugs. There were a couple of mating pairs as well. Obviously, they survived our winter, and some of them were thinking Spring.

The similarities between the Small and Large Milkweed Bugs, with their look-alike cousin, the Boxelder Bug, spurred this article. At various times, I have had all three in my backyard.



Small Milkweed Bugs are found in most of the United States, though rare in Florida. Their habitat is meadows, gardens and fields. They are, generally, active from Spring to Fall, and their bright color patterns give a warning to predators of their noxious taste.

As the common name implies, “milkweed” is their primary food source; however, Small Milkweed Bugs will feed on other plants such as Yarrow and Ragwort. Adults will also feed/suck juices from dead insects and attack eggs of some Leaf Beetles.

The Small Milkweed Bug is distinctly marked in red and black, with a red spot at the base of its head. The red markings across its back form an “x” pattern. This insect is about 3/8-1/2 inch long. Controls are not warranted.

Both adults and larvae are found on milkweeds, feeding on the seeds and, at times, forming a dense cluster on seed pods.

In the picture to the right, Small Milkweed Bug siblings feed on milkweed. If you look closely, you can see that several have already molted and darkened.



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Large Milkweed Bugs range from Southeastern Canada throughout the U.S. and as far south as South America. This insect is also active from Spring to Fall in a variety of habitats from mid-to-lower elevations.

Like their smaller namesake, the Large Milkweed Bug, also, has bright colors to warn predators of their bitter taste. This bitter taste is attributed to their diet. You know what they say - - "you are what you eat!" It is interesting to note that scientists use this species in physiological experiments.

The adult's bright color pattern is orange and black, with the orange divided by a black band across its back; also, the orange on its head forms a "y-shaped" mark. Adults of the Large Milkweed Bug range 1/2-3/4 inch in size, 50% larger than the Small Milkweed Bug.



The Boxelder Bug is 3/8-1/2 inch long and resembles the Large Milkweed Bug in shape. The head is black, with distinct red eyes. The body is black with red stripes running along its sides and one stripe in the center of the pronotum.

Boxelder Bugs feed on seeds, flowers and leaves of Boxelders, but may, also, feed on maples, oaks and ailanthus. They may congregate in large numbers during the Spring, but cause little damage. Come Fall, they will gather in large numbers on the sunny side of buildings, and even enter homes to over-winter.

At first glance, you may see how easy it is to confuse the three bugs, but closer examination of their distinctive markings can make identification easy.

Happy Bug Hunting!

References:

National Wildlife Federation's Field Guide to Insects and Spiders of North America, by Arthur V. Evans, 2008

Photo references: bugguide.net; animalspot.net; pbase.com; easttennesseewildflowers.com; flickr.com; blog.growingwithscience.com

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Read more of his articles on the "Jims Bugs" page @ www.BedfordMasterGardeners.org