

The Secret Lives of Backyard Bugs: Discover Amazing Butterflies, Moths, Spiders, Dragonflies, and Other Insects!

Judy Burris

Wayne Richards

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The beautiful, aphid-loving ladybug has a smelly secret: she can ooze a toxic, yellow liquid from her leg joints to dissuade predators; the caterpillar of the Tiger Swallowtail butterfly masquerades itself as bird droppings; and grasshoppers can spit brown liquid. These and myriad other fascinating insights await readers in *The Secret Lives of Backyard Bugs* by Judy Burris and Wayne Richards*.*

Bugs account for more than half of all known living organisms on our blue planet, with millions of species only estimated and largely overlooked. This title finds beauty and value in a world of small creatures that crawl, fly, and jump, with first-person narration by the sister-brother team of authors adding to its charm: “My first experience with a katydid was unforgettable ...,” and, “Mesmerized, we watched as the wings began to grow larger.”

Riveting color photographs of the life stages of each bug accompany its description. Especially impressive are the artful close-ups showcasing the differences in tiny eggs; those of a firefly are no larger than the numerals on a penny, while the American Copper butterfly’s egg looks like a golfball! Together with Christina Richards, the duo took ninety percent of the photographs for this book in their one-eighth-acre backyard garden in Northern Kentucky.

Intended to inspire budding entomologists to get their hands dirty and scare mom with some creepy crawlies in the process, the volume satisfies on both scores. Older readers will glom onto the wealth of knowledge about life cycles and information on how to grow the best host plants for these bugs, while the picture-book format will undoubtedly elicit excited choruses of “Gross!” from younger readers. The species highlighted are commonly found across the United States and readers are challenged to find these bugs for themselves, with tips provided on how to raise moths and, importantly, protect bug habitat.

Most pages in the slender volume address specific species, such as the Tobacco Hornworm Moth. Some readers will be disappointed that hardworking insects such as ants and bees are glossed over in favor of more beautiful, exotic specimens and will note that the book’s subtitle is misleading: even though it refers to spiders, only one, the Black Widow, is featured.

At its heart, this is a book about noticing and preserving the invertebrates we take for granted. It intrigues throughout and leaves readers with the feeling that their own backyard is a wonderland waiting to be discovered. For instance, who knew that dragonflies have fantastic eyesight? “[T]heir compound eyes’ thousands of facets are arranged to give them an almost 360-degree field of vision.”

Burris and Richards also created *The Life Cycles of Butterflies*, which won *Learning Magazine*’s 2007 Teacher’s Choice Award for Children’s Books.

COURTNEY SORRELL (July 8, 2011)

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