

# BACKYARD ECOLOGY



## LADYBUGS

Grab a camera, and let's go look for ladybugs! Researchers need your help in figuring out why native species — such as the nine-spotted ladybug — are disappearing. So, they're asking for people across the country to send them digital photos of ladybugs. It's easy to participate. Just photograph any you see in your area, and e-mail the pictures on [LostLadybug.org](http://LostLadybug.org).

Everyone loves ladybugs, especially gardeners and farmers. That's because colorful beetles eat aphids, spider mites and other pests that damage plants. In fact, one ladybug may eat as many as 5,000 aphids in its lifetime! Females typically lay their eggs near pests so larvae — which resemble tiny alligators covered with bristles — can chow down right away. After two or three weeks, larvae pupate, then emerge as adults a week or so later. A mature ladybug may live up to one year.

Ladybugs also are called lady beetles and ladybird beetles. It's believed that the names date back to the Middle Ages when farmers prayed to the Virgin Mary for help after swarms of insects attacked their crops. When ladybugs arrived, they rejoiced and called them "Our Lady's beetles."

Worldwide, more than 4,500 ladybug species exist. In the U.S., more than 500 species are known. Of those, only 70 or so are the classic red ladybugs with black spots. The others come in different shades of color (black, reddish orange and pale yellow), with or without spots or patterns. Did you know a ladybug's red color warns predators to buzz off? Not only do they taste bad but ladybugs release a yucky-smelling liquid when threatened.

— Sheryl Smith Rodgers

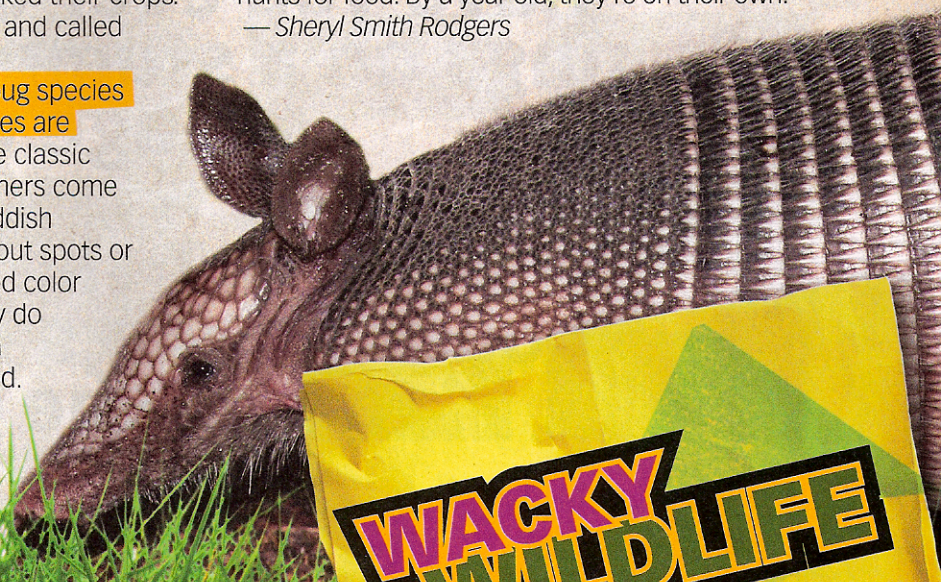
## NINE-BANDED ARMADILLO

Can you guess the name of the world's only mammal that wears a hard hat? Stumped? Meet the armadillo, a prehistoric-looking animal that's related to anteaters and sloths. Of 20 different species, just one — the nine-banded armadillo — occurs in the United States. The others live in South and Central America.

Armadillos get their name — which in Spanish means "little armored one" — from the bony plates that cover their heads, backs, legs and long tails. Most of our U.S. armadillos have nine moveable bands on their back, although the number can range from six to 11. Typically, they're about the size of a house cat and vary in color from brownish to gray. Their long snouts, sticky tongues and sharp claws enable them to root around for worms, beetles, termites, larvae and other insects. Armadillos mainly eat at night, but you may glimpse one out during the day. Their claws also come in handy for digging burrows for sleeping and rearing young.

Here's another cool fact about armadillos: mothers always give birth to four identical babies. How? It's called "delayed implantation." After mating, the fertilized egg floats freely in the mother's womb for about 14 weeks. Around November, the egg implants (attaches) itself to her womb and divides into four embryos. Four months later, the mother bears a litter of four, either all girls or all boys. Scientists believe that delayed implantation allows armadillos to be born during warmer spring months so more will survive. Not long after birth, little ones can walk. Within a few weeks, they join their mother on nightly hunts for food. By a year old, they're on their own.

— Sheryl Smith Rodgers



# WACKY WILDLIFE