

LEVELED BOOK • L

Insect Life Cycle



Written by Chuck Garofano

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Flower beetle



Tropical ant



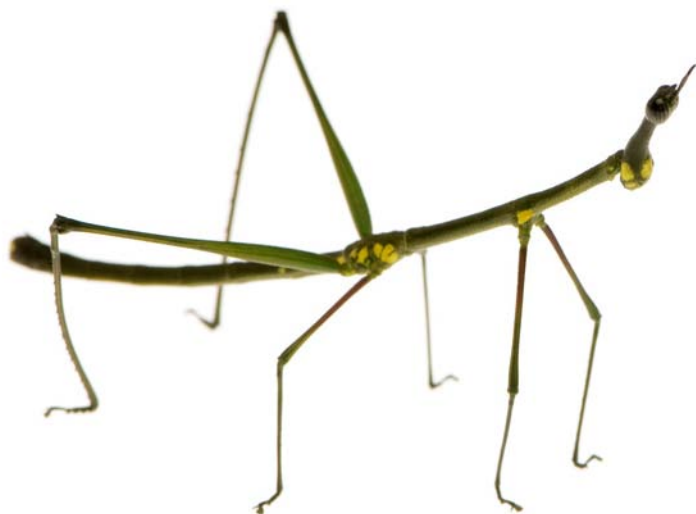
Ladybug

Introduction

When you were born, your body was shaped a lot like it is now. It was smaller, of course, but you had a head, legs, arms, and a torso. When you grow up, your body shape will be about the same.

But some baby animals look nothing like the adults they will become.

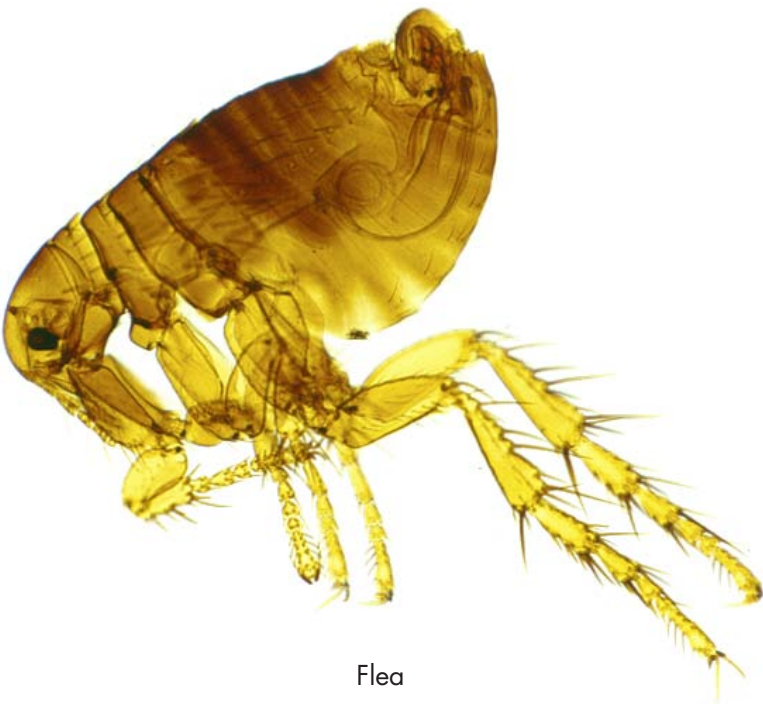
These animals have a different kind of life cycle. A life cycle is the series of changes an animal goes through during its life. Insects have fascinating life cycles. Some insects have a four-stage life cycle. The insect lives as an egg, larva (LAR-vuh), pupa (PYOO-puh), and an adult. Others have a three-stage life cycle. The insect is born as an egg, hatches as a nymph (NIMF), and changes into an adult.



Walking stick

What Are Insects?

There are more than 800,000 different kinds of insects. They include butterflies and beetles, fleas and flies, crickets and chiggers. Although they come in almost every shape, most insects have a few things in common.



Flea



Blue wasp

Beetle

All insects have six legs. Their bodies are divided into three parts. Most insects have wings and can fly. Most insects also wear their skeletons outside their bodies as hard shells. And all insects begin as eggs.



Moth eggs on a leaf

Egg

You can find insect eggs everywhere, if you know where to look. Most insects lay their eggs near the food they like to eat. Moths and butterflies lay eggs underneath leaves. Dung beetles lay eggs in balls of animal poop. Many flies lay eggs on meat. Some insects even lay eggs on other animals.

Many insects make special cases to protect their eggs. One insect puts foam around its eggs. You may have seen this “cuckoo spit” in tall grass. Many insects lay eggs in pools, ponds, or streams. Others lay their eggs underground. Rarely, a female insect keeps the eggs inside her body. The eggs hatch, and the young are born alive.



A female fruit fly laying eggs

Larva

Most eggs hatch into a worm-like stage called a larva. Caterpillars, grubs, and maggots are larvae (LAR-vee). They have long bodies and many legs. Almost all larvae are eating machines. A larva can eat more than its own body weight in one day.



Newly hatched moth larvae on a leaf



Larva of a black swallowtail butterfly

Many larvae can destroy crops. Some larvae suck sap from crop roots. Others devour the leaves. Others eat fruits or vegetables. Beetle larvae can weaken and kill trees. Some moth larvae eat wool clothing. On the other hand, the silkworm, a moth larva, makes silk thread.

Pupa

Once the larva has grown, it must totally change its shape. And it must protect itself while it does so. Many larvae spin cocoons out of silk or grow hard shells. The pupa does not eat and does not move much. But inside, the insect is very busy changing shape. This change is called metamorphosis (MET-ah-MORF-oh-sis).

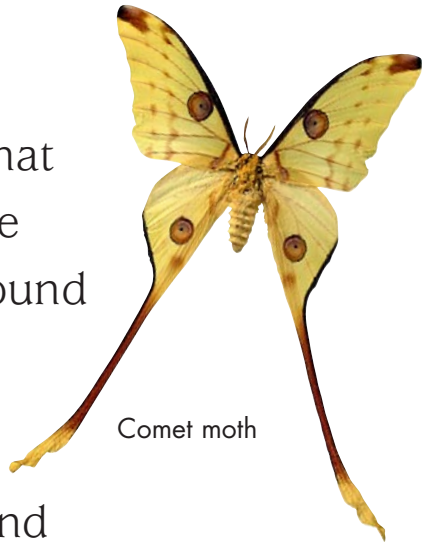


Pupa of a black swallowtail butterfly

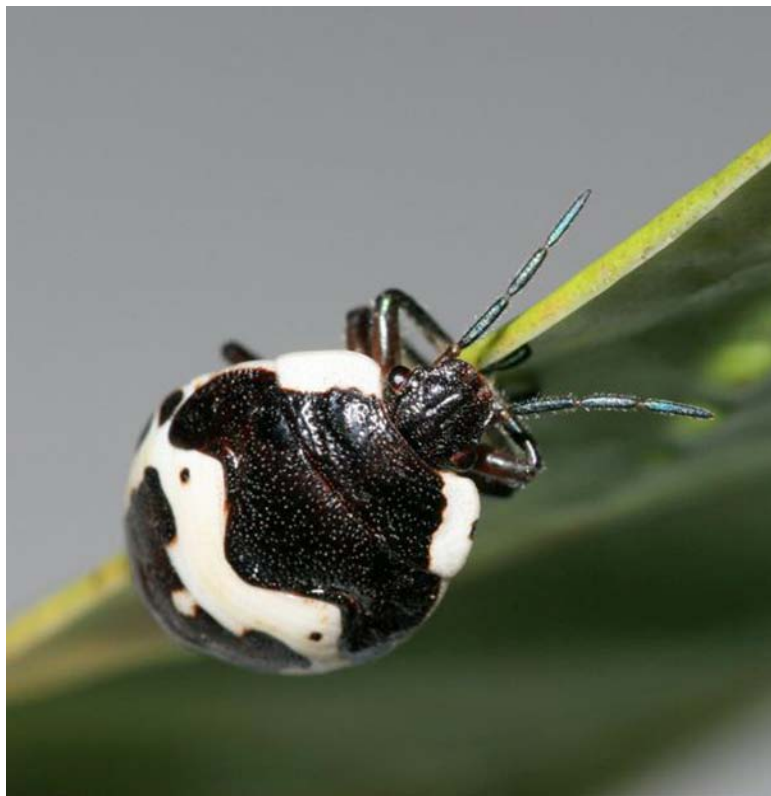
Adult

After the metamorphosis is complete, the pupa hatches as an adult. The adult insect has wings, six legs, and three body parts.

Many larvae that lived in water will hatch into adults that live on land. Larvae that lived underground will hatch above the soil.



Adult insects will find mates, and the females will lay eggs. Sometimes, this is all the adults do. Mayfly adults live for only one day. Most other insects have longer adult lives. They eat, fly, hunt, and work.



A stink bug nymph

Nymph

In the three-stage life cycle, eggs do not hatch as larvae. They hatch as nymphs, which look like small adults. Some nymphs do not have full wings. Others, such as the dragonfly nymph, may live underwater.

Nymphs do not turn into pupae. Instead, they shed their skin as they grow. Each time they shed their skin, they look more like an adult. Slowly, the nymph transforms into an adult.



Adult dragonfly

Shed skin from a dragonfly nymph

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