

# Who's Been Licking the Tall Elm Tree?

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*Who's been licking the tall elm tree?  
It wasn't you, it wasn't me!  
Clues were found and secrets revealed,  
but who it was remained concealed.*





Although our garden is well past its peak by the beginning of October, several major annual events remain. One of these is the appearance of a large number of winged aphids on our 20 year old elm tree. We started noticing them about 10 years ago, and they soon attracted a following of ladybugs. This event always seemed to coincide with Indian Summer. We don't see much of the aphids any more. Either they spend their time out of sight on the upper branches or the ladybugs have become more voracious.

These are Asian Ladybugs which were intentionally imported from the Orient and became established in our area by 1994. A ladybug larva and pupa are shown in the upper and lower left photos. The adults hibernate, often in houses.

*Next page:* The aphids apparently attracted some other predators. The House Centipede is originally from the Mediterranean region, but is now found worldwide. Despite its name and usual habitat, we've never seen one in our house. However, two more were found in the garden this Summer while moving a large pile of bricks. The Jumping Bush Cricket is a native species. It may have simply living in the elm tree rather than preying on aphids.









Another predator is the Wheel Bug. Although I've seen these several times before, they were always near death. A fully live one was a lot more impressive both in its camouflage and the single red fang folded back along its neck. The glossy dark spot with iridescent sparkles on the wing was the only reason I noticed it at all.

Making this page a little less scary, our last climbing rose is silhouetted against the elm.







By now you are probably thinking “who’s been licking the tall elm tree” was just a teaser to get you to read something a lot less interesting, but here’s the answer to *why* someone’s been licking the tall elm tree.

In the last 4 or 5 years we’ve had new visitors at our elm tree, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. They show up in the Spring and Fall when the sap is flowing and make horizontal series of holes in the bark so that sap oozes out. The sap is quite sweet and attracts insects. And yes, I couldn’t resist tasting it too. The sapsucker returns periodically and eats the insects. It’s not unusual for a sapsucker to visit for an hour at a time.





Lunch is served! A puddle of sap attracts three Asian Ladybugs, an Aerial Yellowjacket, and a Carpenter Ant. The two photos were taken a short time apart. During the interval, an odd looking ladybug encrusted with a pale yellow substance came up from the bottom displacing the ant which ran down the trunk. Meanwhile, the yellowjacket wandered around looking for a place to settle down. Flies are also commonly attracted by the sweet sap.



But, that's not the licking I had in mind. Something climbed up the tree and licked up the sap streaming down one of the few relatively smooth areas on the trunk. It licked so hard it burnished the bark.



An owl pellet at the base of the tree gave away the identity one of the night visitors, but the owl was probably there for the numerous Meadow Voles in our garden and not for tree sap. The most likely suspects in the tree licking incident are the raccoons and opossums which also frequent our yard at night. My money is on the raccoon.

Regardless of who's been licking the tall elm tree, the search led to many other interesting discoveries.

*All photographs taken during October, 2010.*

