

Common, Large Milkweed Bugs and Cotton Stainer

The **Common (Small) Milkweed Bug**, *Lygaeus kalmii*, and the **Large Milkweed Bug**, *Oncopeltus fasciatus*, are black and orange insects that belong to the order Hemiptera (true bugs) and family Lygaeidae (seed bugs).

Hemiptera means “half wing.” Each of the front wings has two parts: the top is leathery and the back is membranous. That gives these insects a characteristic “x” pattern on their backs.

Milkweed bugs eat the tissues and seeds of White Vine and other milkweed plants in Corkscrew. After feeding on milkweed plants or seeds, the insects accumulate toxic glycosides in their bodies.

This protects them against predators, and their orange and black colors warn of their toxicity.

They often hang out together on the plants because the gregarious behavior probably increases the effectiveness of their warning coloration.

During mating, female and male may become connected for up to 10 hours.

Eggs are laid on seed pods or under a leaf, and the average female lays 30 pale orange eggs in a day, in many batches throughout the summer.

Egg laying begins from one to 15 days after mating and peaks at about 20 days.

Eggs change color, becoming more intensely orange toward hatching. Nymphs hatch after about one week,

go from egg to adult in about a month, and molt five times in between. The different molts between stages are called instars.

All of the milkweed bug species live up to about four months.

Adults suck nectar from flowers of various herbaceous plants. They can also be scavengers and predators when milkweed seeds are scarce, feeding on honey bees and monarch caterpillars and pupae among others.

Both species of milkweed bugs are immune to the toxic chemicals in milkweed but use them to protect themselves.

White Vine is the most common milkweed plant along the boardwalk, but several species of *Asclepias* will serve as host plants.

Cotton Stainers are often confused with the two milkweed bugs because of its similar appearance. Both milkweed bugs and cotton stainers are present in Corkscrew at different times during the year.

Four species of cotton stainers are known in Florida. The most important of these is *Dysdercus suturellus* and is simply called a Cotton Stainer.

It was the most destructive cotton pest in Florida in the early 20th century when cotton was the chief agricultural crop in the state.

Currently the cotton stainer is a minor pest of cotton, and only in the southern part of the state. It is not cold tolerant and most of Florida’s cotton today

is grown in the northern portions of the state.

The cotton stainer is most prevalent in southern Florida and in Cuba.

The feeding habits of the cotton stainer on cotton plants produce a stain on the lint which reduces the value of the cotton.

The stain comes when the bug punctures the seeds in the developing boll, which causes a juice to seep out of the seeds and leave an indelible stain.

Also, feeding on flower buds by puncturing the buds usually results in reduced size or the fruiting body may abort and drop to the ground.

It also has been a severe pest of oranges on occasions.

In puncturing an orange, a cotton stainer often inserts its beak full length with no visible wound; nevertheless, a single puncture may cause the orange to drop in a few hours from the tree and to decay in one or two days.

Some other hosts of *D. suturellus* include tangerines, okra pods, ripe fruit of papaya, pods and blossoms of oleander, several hibiscus species, Caesarweed (*bloom pictured above with instar*), Spanish Needles, rose buds and blossoms, eggplant, nightshade, and guava.

There are five nymphal stages or instars. The first usually is spent underground. The duration of each of the first four stages typically averages four to five days during midsummer, but the fifth stage commonly takes about twice as long.

All five stages require from 21 to 35 days to complete. The nymphs are generally red and often have thin white bands around their abdomens.



Large Milkweed Bug adult and instars, above. Common Milkweed Bug adult and instars, below.



Cotton Stainer adult, above, and instar, below.

