

A few days after mating, the female starts laying clusters of 20 or more yellow eggs. The clusters are called **clutches**. A female might lay five or more clutches. In nature the female lays her eggs in a ball of milkweed seed fluff or under a bit of bark for protection. In your classroom habitat she will usually lay them in the polyester wool.

After mating and laying eggs, adult milkweed bugs might live another 2 months in a kind of buggy retirement. The life span of the milkweed bug in a sheltered habitat bag in a classroom is about 4 months. In the wild they probably don't live that long.

In captivity a milkweed-bug population will continue to reproduce one generation after another. If the 2-month life cycle continues, six generations could be produced in a year! That's potentially a lot of milkweed bugs.

In the wild, however, milkweed bugs stop reproducing in the fall when the weather gets cold and the milkweed plants die. The

adult bugs that have not reproduced find protected places where they can hibernate. Even though they have natural antifreeze in their bodies, winter surely takes its toll on the population. But life is durable, and at least a few bugs always live until spring. And when a male and a female survivor meet on a fine spring day, they naturally continue the process of building up the population during the warm days of summer.



Oncopeltus fasciatus

For purposes of classification, scientists have divided the animal **kingdom** into major groups called phyla. Each **phylum** is divided into classes. Each **class** is divided into orders. Each **order** is divided into families. Each **family** is divided into genera, and each **genus** into **species**. A species is a basic category or a kind of animal. A species consists of individuals that are similar in structure and that can breed to produce offspring. Individuals in a species will not generally breed with individuals from another species.

The milkweed bug studied in this course is a member of the phylum **Arthropoda**, the class **Insecta**, the order **Hemiptera** (true bugs), the family **Lygaeidae** (seed bugs), the genus ***Oncopeltus***, and the species ***fasciatus***. The common name is large milkweed bug and the scientific name is *Oncopeltus fasciatus*. A close relative of the large milkweed bug is *Oncopeltus sexmaculatus*, the six-spotted milkweed bug (same genus, different species). Another more distant relative of these two bugs is *Lygaeus kalmii*, the small milkweed bug (same family but different genus and species). Each is considered a different species.