

When beetles rain from the sky



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Ask a Master Gardener

Question: Large beetles were hitting our windows in the early morning, apparently attracted by the lights inside. We have never seen them before and found a couple dead on our driveway later that day. Any idea what they are?

Answer: Most of us have never seen a rain beetle (genus *Pleocomma* in the superfamily Scarabaeoidea) because they spend most of their lives in immature stages beneath the ground for more than a decade, scientists estimate.

After 10-12 years underground as larvae, the beetles burrow to the surface to mate. In a fall or winter rainstorm, before sunrise or just after sunset, you might be lucky enough to see the winged male searching for a flightless female, who waits patiently for his arrival at the entrance of her burrow.

The males, operating on stored fat that may fuel only a couple hours of flight, stay low to the ground. They are aided by a pair of large antennae that follow the scent of the female's pheromone. Rain beetles are often attracted to lights and pools of water.

Rain beetles are closely related to scarabs and are found only in western North America. *Pleocomma* larvae have been found in both forest and fruit



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Possessing a robust oval body similar to other scarab beetles, Rain Beetles' ventral side is densely covered with fine, long hairs which extend to their legs and margins of the thorax and elytra. Males can fly, while flightless females have rigid digging devices at the end of their head.

trees in the Pacific Northwest. They feed on fibrous and main roots and underground portions of the tree trunk as well as fungi and other organic matter.

Possessing a robust oval body similar to other scarab beetles, their ventral side is densely covered with fine, long hairs which extend to their legs and margins of the thorax and elytra. In fact, "*Pleocomma*" is Greek for abundant hair.

Rain beetles are dark or reddish brown and their backs

are hairless and glossy. The antennae are 11-segmented, with oval clubs at the end made up of several lamellae, or plate-like structures. Females do not fly and have larger bodies with powerful legs and a rigid digging device called a clypeus at the end of their head, designed for excavation.

The adult rain beetles have neither functional mouths nor digestive tracts because they have only one purpose, and that is to reproduce. Adults can

live for many months but do not feed. Although males die shortly after mating, a female closes off the entrance to her burrow and moves deeper in the soil to lay her eggs.

The female produces up to 60 eggs and will lay her eggs in a spiral pattern in the burrow. Eggs hatch within a few months. Larvae molt only once a year and remain as larvae for 9-13 years before they pupate. Larvae have C-shaped bodies that are generally creamy white.

Rain is good for drought and for rain beetles! Rain beetles are so unique that one species was nominated for the state insect of Oregon but was defeated by the Oregon Swallowtail Butterfly.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.