



## Dung Beetles

Yes, there really are dung beetles! These are members of the family “Scarabeidae” or scarabs for short. They get the common name for their habit of rolling up dung into round balls and using this as food for their young. The ancient Egyptians held these beetles as sacred, as they represented reincarnation. The life history of scarabs is fascinating. The adult beetles, after having mated, find a dung heap or large animal dropping and form large balls of the stuff (usually a lot larger than themselves). They roll these balls along on the ground until they find a suitable spot to bury it. Once a hole is dug, the ball is rolled into it and the female deposits an egg on the ball. The whole thing is then gently covered up. The larva hatches from the egg and feeds on the organic matter for up to a year or more before pupating in the empty ball. The adult finally emerges and the process starts over again.

I mentioned the Egyptians as holding the scarab as sacred. As they observed the beetle rolling the ball of matter along and burying it, then the next year emerging as a beetle again, this seemed to be a type of reincarnation. Scholars believe they equated this with the mystical idea of reincarnation of humans. If a person’s body was preserved and buried deep in the earth, perhaps the same thing would happen, and the human would be alive again. No wonder that the scarab was an important aspect of the Egyptian religious and cultural belief. But I digress.

Many scarabs live their life underground as larvae for several years. The largest dung beetle in the world, the Hercules beetle, spends at least two years feeding as an immature under the ground. Hercules larvae feed on elephant dung, and are only found in Africa. The adults are so large they weigh in at 1/4 pound or more. They’re about the size of your closed fist. That’s big!

Closer to home, the rain beetle (a 1 1/4” scarab) is found in our Oregon forests as an adult in October just about the time it begins to rain here, thus the name. Males fly during wet weather looking for females with which to mate. They use deer and elk droppings as their dung source, rolling it into balls for the larvae to feed on.

Beetles make up the largest group of insects in the world. The variety and adaptability of the beetles make them a truly wonderful insect to study and/or observe.

As Ed Sullivan once said when he had the fab four on his show, “Let’s hear it for the Beetles”, or was that “Beatles”? How soon I forget!

