

Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank



Stag Beetle

Beetles are fantastically successful insects across the whole world, and belong to the order Coleoptera, which means 'sheath wings'. Most have two pairs of wings, with the tough front pair folded over the much more delicate hind wings, forming a protective armour. Their hard outer layer is called an exoskeleton, which is waterproof and airtight, but with tiny holes called spiracles which allows it to breathe.

Beetles are the largest order of all insects, with more than 400,000 different types identified so far, and have biting jaws on the underside of their head, distinguishing them from bugs like aphids, which have sucking mouthparts. They are cold blooded, and control their body temperature by moving and basking in the sunshine to warm up.

We will all be familiar with the lovely, brightly coloured ladybird, a real gardeners friend, as it eats lots of aphids, but our largest beetle, at up to 9cms long, is the Stag Beetle. It well named, as the male has really impressive, large claws which resemble deer antlers. Like deer, they use these to fight with other males for the chance to mate with the females. They lock claws as each male tries to lift and overturn their rival, and then dash them to the ground. Beetle wrestling!

After mating, the female lays her eggs in rotting dead wood, and then dies. The creamy coloured grubs hatch out quickly and remain inside the dead wood, feeding on it for up to 6 years as it grows. It then burrows into the soil, turning into a pupa where it develops over winter and spring into the fully formed adult beetle, emerging in the summer.

Stage beetles are only on the wing for a few weeks, from early June to August, easily visible on warm summer evenings as they fly around, because of their large size. Gardens with untidy bits of dead wood are important habitats for this amazing beetle, but they also bask on warm pavements to heat up their bodies, which is a risky business as people often tread on them. Not much reward for such a short adult life!

So, help wildlife by allowing parts of your garden to be less tidy, and keeping some old logs that can gently rot down, providing a safe place for all sorts of useful insects to live, including our largest beetle.