



Six-spotted tiger beetle

Beetlemania!

Some are mighty. Some are tiny. Some are dull. Some are shiny. Beetles are everywhere, and they come in more sizes, shapes, and colors than any other animal on the planet.

by Matt Seek

Meet the Beetles

Imagine you could stuff one of every kind of animal into a bag. For every four times you reached inside, you'd likely pull out a beetle. Biologists have named 250,000 to 400,000 kinds of these hard-shelled insects. In fact, there are more beetle species on Earth than any other animal!

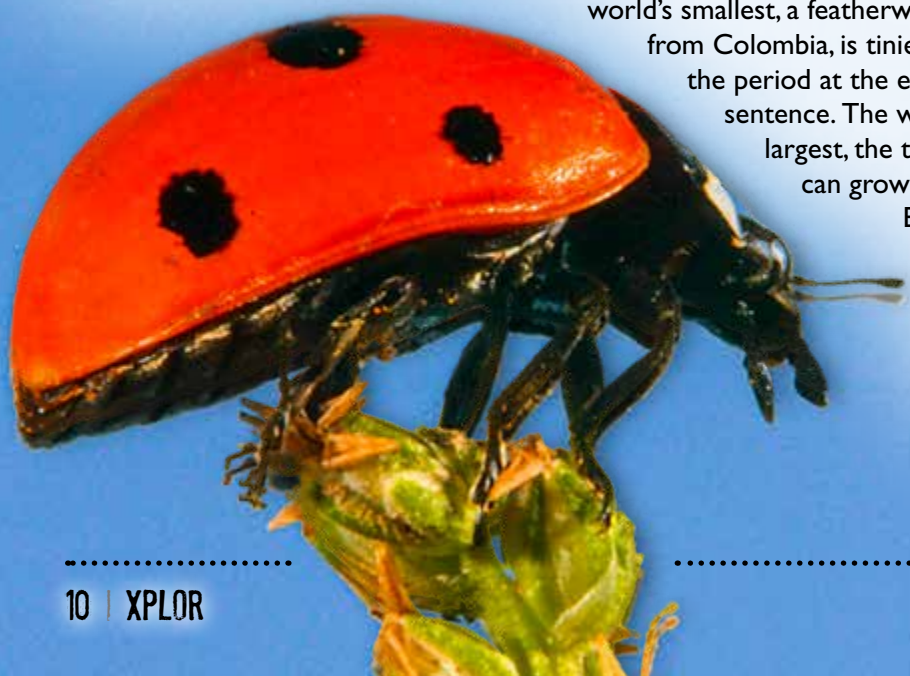
They're found on every continent except Antarctica, and they live in some of the world's harshest environments: scorching deserts, drippy rainforests, wave-crashed beaches. Although most crawl on land, some even swim in the water.

Beetles eat nearly anything you can imagine — and some things you can't. Insects, plants, wood, dead animals, and even poop make it on their menu. Yuck!

They come in a variety of sizes. The world's smallest, a featherwing beetle from Colombia, is tinier than the period at the end of this sentence. The world's

largest, the titan beetle of Brazil, can grow as long as a grown-up's hand.

But you don't have to travel to South America to find fascinating beetles. An array of colors, shapes, and sizes are found here in the Show-Me State.



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Seven-spotted lady beetle

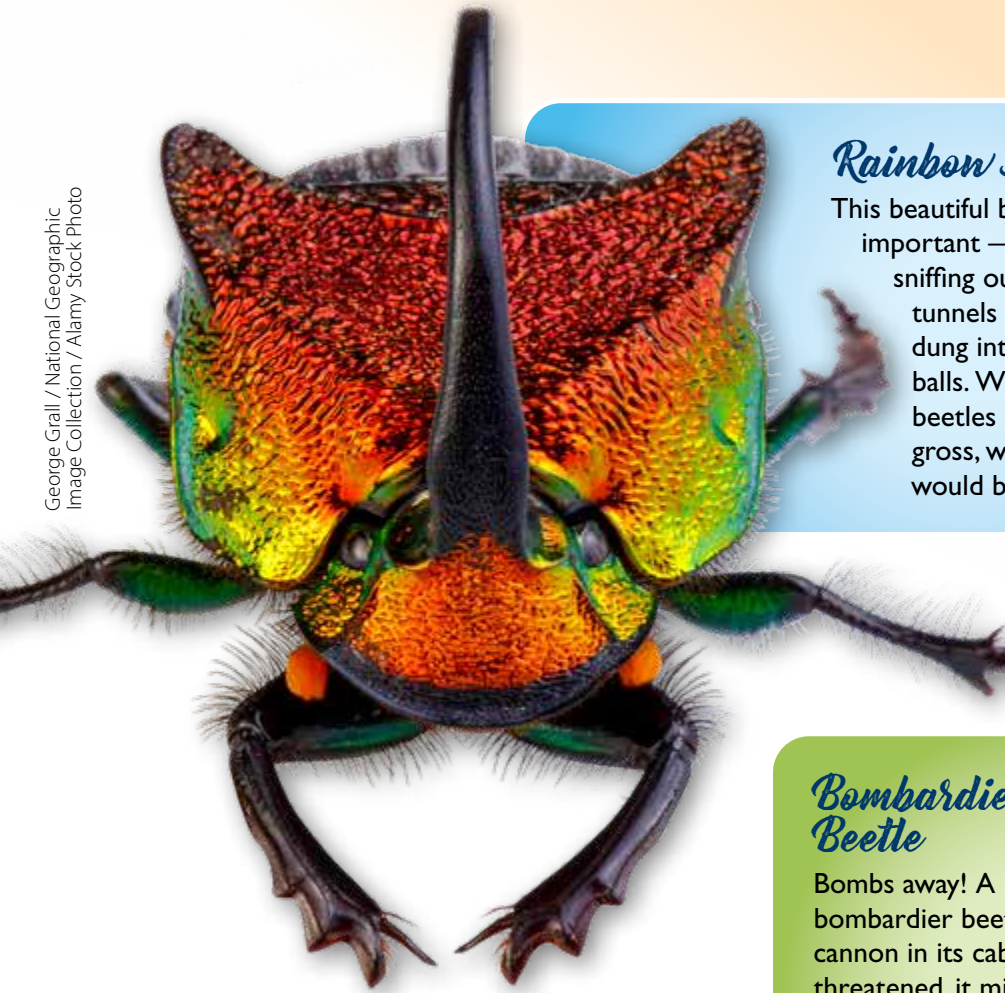


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What Makes a Beetle a Beetle?

Beetles are insects, like ants, grasshoppers, and dragonflies. Most insects share the same basic body plan. For example, they don't have bones. Instead, an armorlike shell called an exoskeleton supports their weight and protects their squishy insides. Their bodies are divided into three parts: a head, a thorax, and an abdomen. And they usually have six legs, four wings, and two antennae.

So how do you tell a beetle from other insects? The easiest way is to look at its back. A beetle's front wings are thick and hard. They're called elytra (*el-ih-trah*), and they form a **straight line** where they meet on the beetle's back. The back wings are thin and delicate. When the beetle wants to fly, it holds its elytra out of the way and flaps its back wings. When it wants to rest or walk, it folds its elytra over its back wings to protect them from harm.



Rainbow Scarab

This beautiful beetle has an ugly — but important — job. Its antennas are good at sniffing out poop. When it finds a pile, it tunnels underneath, rolls some of the dung into balls, and lays eggs inside the balls. When the eggs hatch, the baby beetles eat the poop. Although it seems gross, without these beetles, the world would be a much stinkier place!



Tom Murray

Bombardier Beetle

Bombs away! A bombardier beetle has a cannon in its caboose. When threatened, it mixes up a cocktail of chemicals inside its abdomen. This causes an explosive reaction, like when you mix vinegar and baking soda. The chemicals spray out of the beetle's backside and burn any would-be attacker.

Giant Stag Beetle

Back off! When a male stag beetle finds a rotten log, he doesn't want to share it. So when two males meet, they lock their oversized jaws and try to push each other out of the way. The one who wins gets any female beetles who show up. And females get rotting wood in which to lay their eggs.



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Fiery Searcher

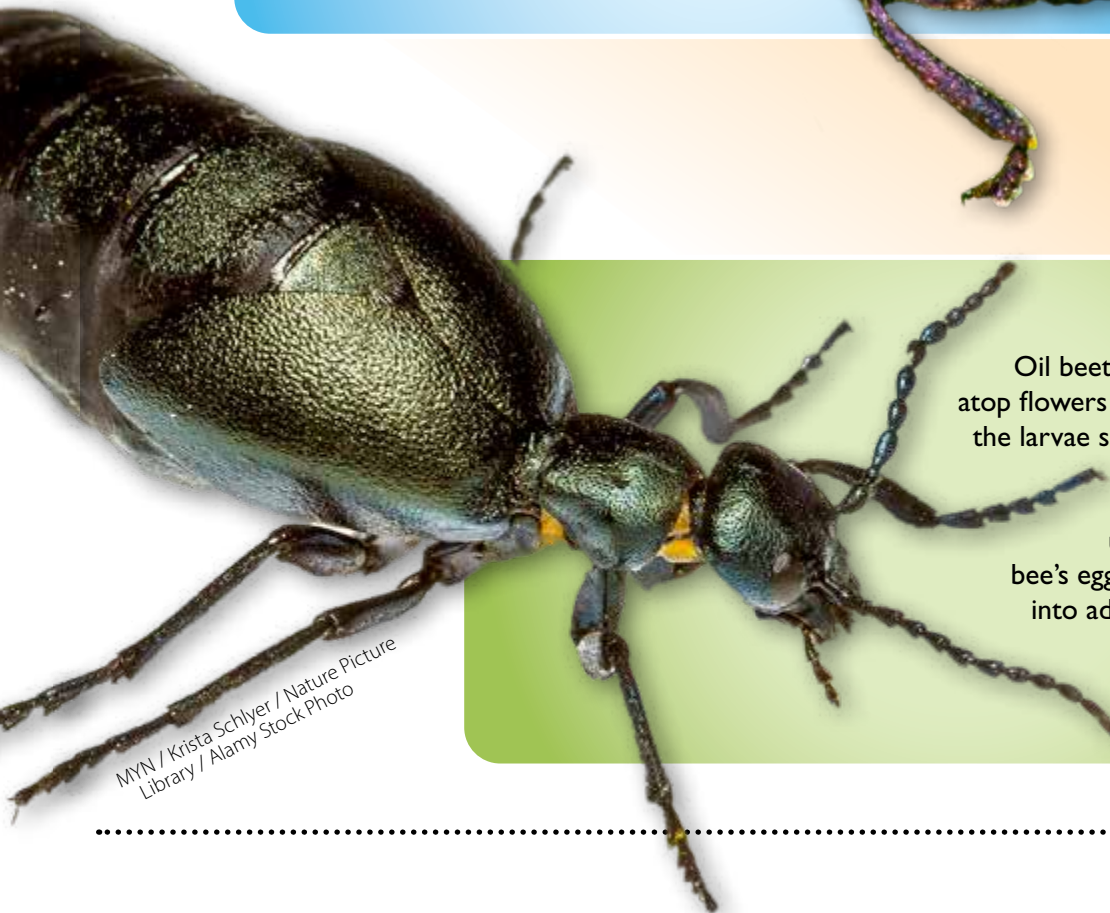
These shiny beetles are known as caterpillar killers — and for good reason. They hide under leaf litter during the day. At night, they crawl into the treetops to deliver murder and mayhem on any caterpillars they find. By eating leaf-munching pests like gypsy moths and tent caterpillars, fiery searchers keep forests healthy.



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Warty Leaf Beetle

This tiny beetle is the same size, shape, and color as caterpillar poop, which is called frass. The beetle's frass-tastic disguise helps it hide in plain sight from birds and other predators that might try to eat it.



Oil Beetle

Oil beetle babies (aka larvae) wait atop flowers for bees. When one lands, the larvae scramble onto the bee and hitch a ride to the bee's nest. There, the unwelcome guests eat the bee's eggs and pollen as they grow into adult beetles. When handled, grown-up beetles release drops of oil that can blister your skin.

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Acorn Weevil

An acorn weevil's long snout is tipped with strong jaws. Female weevils use them to drill through acorn shells so they can lay eggs inside. When the eggs hatch, baby weevils eat the acorn meat. When the acorn drops off the tree, the weevils wobble out, burrow into the soil, and spend winter underground turning into adults.

Calligraphy Beetle

Beetles divide up nature so they don't compete with each other for food and space. Take calligraphy beetles for example. These beetles are named for the fancy markings on their wing covers. There are many kinds of calligraphy beetles — each with a unique wing pattern — but most prefer to eat a particular plant.

David Cappaert, Bugwood.org



American Burying Beetle

Life for an American burying beetle begins with an end. When a small animal dies, these beetles arrive. Working through the night, a male and female use their flat heads to bulldoze soil out from under the corpse. Once it's buried, the female lays eggs on top of it. When the eggs hatch, the parents chew up meat from the corpse and feed it to the baby beetles.

Banded Net-Wing

Is this a moth? Nope. With its large wings, this firefly-sized beetle isn't a fast flyer. But it doesn't need to worry about getting eaten. The bold orange-and-black bands on its wings warn would-be predators that the beetle tastes terrible.



Susan Ellis, Bugwood.org

Golden Tortoise Beetle

When it's angry, scared, or with a mate, this little leaf-muncher can change from golden to orange or red. Scientists think the beetle changes color to trick birds into thinking it's a ladybug. Apparently, birds find golden tortoise beetles yummy, but ladybugs yucky.



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Six-Spotted Tiger Beetle

For its size, this emerald-green beetle is one of the fastest animals on Earth. To catch prey, the six-spotted speedster boogies along at a blistering 125 body lengths per second. If a tiger beetle had legs as long as a human's, it could run more than 200 miles per hour!



David Cappaert, Bugwood.org