

SEXTON BEETLES by Dave and Gill Shearing

Also known as Burying Beetles

Health Warning:

this article should not be read before you sit down for a meal!

You might have noticed that the countryside is not littered with the corpses of small Rodents and Birds despite the number that must die. Some are obviously eaten by Foxes, Cats and large Birds but a large number succumb to the attentions of Sexton Beetles, which are named after the person in a Church Parish who used to be responsible for the graveyard.



When the body of a dead animal starts to decay it gives off an odour, which Sexton Beetles can detect up to a mile away. They can fly and are active during the night and day. On homing in on the smell from the corpse of a small animal or Bird, the Male Beetle examines the surrounding soil to see if it is suitable to be dug for a grave. If not, the Beetle will lie down on its back beneath the corpse, its feet pushing the load along until it finds a suitable place. It then waits for a mate.



A Female will eventually turn up, irresistibly drawn by the odour of rotting flesh. The pair will drive off any rivals before starting the long and arduous process of burial. They dig a channel under the corpse, pulling it down in to its 'burial chamber' up to two feet below the surface. They shovel the soil with their spade shaped antennae, their powerful jaws cutting through any obstructive roots.

