

Backyard Beetles

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It has always been my goal to improve the landscape of places I live for the benefit of wildlife. With that intention in mind, I sought to plant evergreens at my current residence; not only for wildlife, but as a sound and wind buffer as well. So, fifty little Norway Spruces later, two rows of evergreens lined my front yard. While digging those fifty holes, I realized I just wasn't digging up dirt; little white grubs, a few inches below the surface, were also appearing. Hmm? I know that people spray their yards for "evil grubs" that'll make their yards turn brown; were these it? What were they? I sought an answer and found, to my surprise, they were June Beetles, or more commonly June Bugs, those cinnamon colored beetles that hit our windows at night and land on our screens. I reckoned that proved their commonality around homes: house equals yard equals June Beetles.

June Beetles are in the beetle order, Coleoptera, in a family known as Scarab Beetles. Other notable scarabs include Stag, Tiger, and the dreaded, Japanese Beetles. These coleopterans are further broken down into their own respective genus. *Phyllophaga*, the June Beetle genus, is aptly named since "*phyllophaga*" means "leaf-cutter". As an insect, their life cycle involves complete metamorphosis. Most June Beetles fall into the following life cycle regimen. The females lay eggs in late spring or early summer, they hatch, and the larva, or grub, feeds just under the surface of the ground. The larva continues to eat and grow for three years, finally pupating in its third year. It then emerges in late spring (May Beetles) or early summer (June Beetles). As an adult, it feeds on the foliage of various plants. The males find their "girlfriends", mate, and the cycle continues.

The June Beetles that hit our screens and windows at night are the males. Large and lumbering, their wings have adapted to fly these honkers, not land them; hence the crash. The females give off a pheromone that a male can smell from 20 yards away. Since she can't fly, she is positioned near optimal egg deposition sites. After their "ritual", she burrows into the soil and deposits a few dozen eggs in the moist soil. The male then continues his incessant slamming into our lights, doors and windows: fun to watch, except for those summer evenings as you traverse through your entry swatting the chunky kamikazes.

June Beetles are unfortunately considered pests in two stages of their life. The grub, when fully mature, is about 1" long, white, and with a brown head. They are usually found curled into a C-shape. The larva feed exclusively on grass roots; this in turn kills the grass. In yards with high larval densities, large areas of lawns can turn brown. The larva can also damage some cereal crops. The adults get themselves into trouble much like the Japanese Beetle: by defoliating our trees and shrubs. While not as severe as the Asian invaders, they can be troublesome. Fortunately, there are biological controls: birds, bats, bugs. Blackbirds are common perusers of yards, probing their beaks into the soil for the little, white morsel below the surface. Bats are a consumer of the adults, using their echolocation at night to hunt the ungainly flyers. Finally, ants will eat the eggs that are laid and wasps and other parasites will use the beetles as hosts for their own larva.



While many lawns will be mowed this summer, I loathe mowing. June Beetles are welcome any day! With the addition of the spruce trees, I hope to attract more wildlife, be it birds, bugs, or bats. Our yards are little micro-habitats in a great sea of agriculture, beckoning animals to seek refuge. Whether it is a June Beetle hitting our windows, a toad working our landscaping, or a katydid singing from the overgrown corner, our yards should be looked at as important living quarters for even the smallest of wildlife. As you mow your yard this summer, remember those little animals, underneath the blades and tires, eking out their survival.