Stag beetle – Lucanus cervus

Characteristics

The colour of this unmistakable, largest European beetle (up to 75 mm) ranges from dark, reddish brown to dark brown. The head and neck shield of the male are often black. The sticking out antennae and strong legs are also dark. Only the male carries on its wide square head the antler-shaped oversized mandibles. The female has short but strong pincers.

Lifestyle

The female's mandibles are shorter but strong and ideal for cutting into tree bark and drawing sap to lick up. Males do not have this ability, they depend on females or on open tree wounds. The sap is then sucked up with the lower, brush-shaped parts of the mouth. In the mating season, several males gather at the feeding place attracted by the smell of food and possibly by females' pheromones. It is then not unusual that each female is pursued by up to four males, who try to push their competitors from the tree with their mandibles. After such a fight, the strongest male puts itself over the female. They can stay several days in this position and defend the female and its feeding place. After much pairing (up to 100 times!) and copulation, the female deposits the eggs in the soil around the roots of oak trees, and, more rarely, of birches and other broad-leafed trees. This is an Eldorado for these large beetles: their larvae, also called grubs, develop in the wood of rotting logs and reach an adult size of up 10 cm. However, their development usually takes 3 to 5 years, and under bad climatic conditions, even up to 8 years!

Threat and protection status

Particularly at dusk the male stag beetles, often intoxicated by the fermenting tree sap, can be seen "staggering" about. That is, their droning flight can be heard. In Central Europe their number has been drastically reduced as optimal living conditions can no longer be provided to them due to the removal of dead wood from forests. Rotting wood constitutes a source of nourishment, a breeding place and a shelter for larvae and other organisms for years. Around 1730 species of Austrian beetles live in wood; a large number of threatened insects and about 1500 indigenous fungi are dependent on dead wood.