

Beaver Beetles
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by Marc Behrendt

Anyone who has trapped, skinned or worked with a beaver has seen them. Those tiny “bugs” that seem to number in the thousands. Talking to trappers, I ask them what they think the tiny insects are, and the usual response is first a repulsive look, then occasionally a shiver of disgust. I have been told these creepy crawlies are lice, ticks, fleas, and “I don’t care, they are really gross!” Not one person knew the actual identity of these tiny creatures.

These insects are actually tiny beetles, commonly called the beaver beetle, scientifically known as *Platypyllus Castoris*. Measuring up to 3 mm (1/8 inch) in length, the beaver beetle is hardly threatening. It has a flattened body, has no eyes and no wings. Both adults and larvae feed on skin secretions and parasitic mites on the host beaver. It does not bite; it does not cause disease. It merely is crawling around, looking for a new host, since the present host seems to have encountered serious health issues.

Beaver beetles are specific to beavers, though I remember trapping a mink a few years ago that had insects suspiciously resembling the beaver beetle. Do these parasites damage the pelts? The answer is a definite NO! Though incredibly abundant in the beaver’s fur, these external parasites eat only the dead skin and microscopic mites that live in the dead skin. They do not damage the fur at all.

Beavers may host other parasites as well. Roundworms are a common parasite that lives within the beaver’s body, but does not cause death. These are tiny and white, usually coiled worms measuring up to 10 cm (4 inches) long. Another external parasite is the ear tick.

Beaver beetles live on the beaver. There is actually another beetle that lives specifically in beaver nests. These nest beetles are in the same family as *Platypyllus Castoris*, scientifically named *Leptinullus Validus*. It shall be called the beaver nest beetle for our purposes.

If you know an insect collector, you may make a friend for life if you make available a fresh beaver from which live beetles can be removed. And if you are digging up a beaver den, to collectors, the nest beetles are close to being the Holy Grail of insects. If you wish to preserve the beetles for a collector who cannot be present, merely drop the insects into a bottle of rubbing alcohol, and the collector can mount the beetles from that medium.

When their present host dies, beaver beetles either die or wander off to find a new beaver host. So to collect the beetles, a fresh beaver, less than 24 hours dead, is necessary. And if you find the little critters crawling around on the fur, there is no need to spray the fur with insecticide or toss it away. They are just tiny beetles that have just lost their home.

Note: If you are interested in collecting these beetles for an insect collector, contact Ken Karnes at species@greenapple.com. Ken is an avid insect collector, as well as an experienced fox trapper. ### Marc Behrendt, 421 S. Columbus St., Somerset, OH 43783-9503