

Darkling Beetles

Stink beetles or darkling beetles belong to the genus *Eleodes* in the family Tenebrionidae. Adults are among the largest commonly encountered beetles in California. They are black and slow-moving. They cannot fly because the wing covers (elytra) are fused over the back. Darkling beetles are commonly seen along roads, in open areas or under boards or rocks. They generally range from 1 to 2 inches in length.

Darkling beetles are ground dwelling and both adults and larvae feed on dead or decaying vegetable matter. They are particularly common in coastal or desert areas. Where there is considerable debris on the ground they may be found beneath every board or piece of decaying wood. In desert areas some species actually migrate in large numbers certain times of the year. These beetles overwinter as either adults or larvae. Adults are known to live several years and make interesting pets.

The name "stink beetle" comes from the adult habit of

standing on their head with the abdomen pointing in the air, and emitting an offensive smelling, reddish black fluid. These beetles will also play dead if the other strategies fail to work. They use these behaviors, and chemicals to defend themselves against predators, particularly birds, rodents and raccoons. Some predators have learned how to deal with this stinky behavior though and will push the beetles rear end into the soil while they eat the head end.

The larvae are commonly called meal worms or false wireworms. They are brown to yellowish in color, cylindrical and shiny. They closely resemble the mealworms sold in pet stores, and in fact are closely related to those species. Larval darkling beetles are most often found under the bark of dead trees, in stumps, or under rocks, boards, or logs on the ground. Adults and larvae can be easily kept in captivity. They can be fed rolled oats, pieces of apple and dried, low fat dog food (kibbles). The larvae will even eat polystyrene!



Eleodes adult; photo by M.F. Keller (left); larva, photo by cal.uidaho.edu.

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