

AMERICAN BURYING BEETLE (*Nicrophorus americanus*)

Description

The American burying beetle is easily distinguished from other beetles by its large size, reaching a length of 1-1.5 inches (25-38mm). It is all black in color with a red spot on top of the head, orange tipped antennae, and hard, black wings which have two pairs of scalloped red spots. The most diagnostic feature is a large orange-red marking on the pronotum, a feature shared by no other members of the genus. Adults bury vertebrate carcasses, upon which larvae feed. Elsewhere in historic range, beetles were known to consume fish used as fertilizer in fields.

Distribution

The American burying beetle was formerly widespread in the forest regions of eastern North America. Today this species has disappeared from most of its historic range. American burying beetles are known to be in existence in four states: Block Island off the coast of Rhode Island, in eastern Oklahoma, in northern Arkansas, and central Nebraska.

Habitat

Soil type must allow the beetles to bury vertebrate carcasses for reproductive purposes and care of young. The carcasses need to be buried quickly before flies successfully colonize the carrion. Habitat requirements are unclear. Specimens have been collected in tallgrass prairie areas of Oklahoma. In Nebraska, specimens have been collected on treeless grasslands around Sandhill lakes on or near the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, in cropland near a riparian habitat in Lincoln County, in grasslands of the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest, and in riparian/savannah areas along the Platte River corridor of Dawson County. Species exhibits broad vegetation tolerances, though natural habitat may be mature forests. Species is recorded from grassland, old field shrubland, and hardwood forests.

Status

Global: G2-Imperiled. Federally Endangered. State Endangered. Nebraska: S1-Critically Imperiled. Population trends have not been determined. Surveys for the beetle have continued to find more individuals than expected throughout the central third of the state. Species has exhibited dramatic range collapse in recent times, having been reduced to less than 10% of its original range. The American burying beetle suffers from a combination of threats including habitat fragmentation, insecticide and bug-zapper use, disturbance of soils, and competition from vertebrate scavengers.

Management

Individuals who conduct activities within counties where previous sightings have been made should be aware of the identification of this species. Prior to conducting ground-disturbing activity, preliminary inspections of the area would be beneficial. Any sightings should be reported to the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Areas where they are found should be protected by limiting ground-disturbing activities and protection of the habitat. Because the American burying beetle has a highly vulnerable status in the wild, the two known natural populations (Block Island, Rhode Island and eastern Oklahoma) should be protected and maintained. Another requirement is maintaining captive populations for reintroducing the beetle to its historical habitat. Maintaining proper habitat (mature forests), and enhancing new habitat is very important. Enhancing new habitat and open fields can be done by mowing, grazing and burning.

More Information

<http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?spcode=1028>