

Carpet Beetles

by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist

This colorful little beetle is frequently brought to the clinic from clients' houses, especially when they find large numbers of them crawling and flying around the kitchen. The common name 'Carpet Beetle' was applied many years ago when woolen carpets were used. The larvae prefer to eat animal products and the sheeps wool in carpets provided an abundant, available source of food for them in a warm, protected environment. It was not uncommon for the housewife cleaning the carpets with a sweeper or vacuum cleaner to see the tufts of the carpet being picked up leaving large, bare spots. Most often that happened in protected places behind or under the heavy furniture. The beetles were feeding on the underside of the carpet, undetected until the damage was done. Carpets are now mostly synthetic fibers that are not eaten by beetles, but we still use the name Varied Carpet Beetle for Anthrenus verbasci, the one we see frequently in our area and was found in Seattle as early as 1917. These beetles are attracted to any dried animal material for their food, so woolen garments or fabrics are subject to their attacks. Museums have to be constantly alert to protect animal skins. Our MG insect collection would be a delectable feast for these little beetles. That is why we must keep it properly fumigated and the door tightly closed to protect it. Without protection our collection would soon be nothing more than powder on the bottoms of the drawers. Whenever carpet beetles are brought to the clinic, I feel uneasy until they are drowned in alcohol. I hope no one ever throws live carpet beetles in the waste cans!

Like many other insects, carpet beetles can adapt to various foods depending upon what is available. The lack of woolen carpets in our homes has not stopped them. They readily eat dried food products, especially grains, flour, pasta and dried pet foods. The larval stages consume the most food because they are growing. The adult beetles eat only enough to provide energy for movement because they do not increase in size after they emerge from the pupal stage. The larvae that hatch from eggs are very small and difficult to see. As they feed and molt they grow to about 3/16 inch long including bristles (see photo). The adults are about 1/8 inch long.

Several other kinds of carpet beetles are found in Skagit County. Look at the specimens in the MG collection and you will see some of them there. The Larder Beetle (Dermestes lardarius) or Bacon Beetle, as it is sometimes called, has been brought to the clinic several times. Like the Varied Carpet Beetle, it prefers animal material for food, but it readily eats grain products. It has been found in grain elevators and Magpie nests near Pullman and in a butcher shop in Seattle. It appears to be well established in Skagit County and common in homes. Another species (Dermestes maculatus) is called the Hide Beetle and has been used to clean skeletons of vertebrate animals in the museum collection at WSU. I have not seen

it yet in Skagit County. Are there any skeletons in your closet? The Black Carpet Beetle (*Attagenus piceus*) is not often found in NW houses, but is more commonly on flowers and in grain elevators. It was found in Seattle as early as 1912, Vancouver, B. C. in 1944 and has been brought to the MG clinic recently. The Warehouse Beetle (*Trogoderma inclusum*) frequents bird nests, tent caterpillar nests and was found in a dried milk factory in Lynden, Washington. It also is in Skagit County.

These little beetles can complete their life cycle from egg to adult in as little as four months with favorable conditions of food, moisture, and temperature. Unfavorable conditions such as lack of food, extreme dry conditions or low temperatures will slow them down and they have been known to persist in the larval stages for as long as 5 years until conditions are sufficiently favorable to complete development to the adult form. That may complicate control methods. According to EB 1257, sanitation is the first step in getting rid of them. As long as there is an available food supply they will continue to multiply. Sometimes that food supply is difficult for us to find, even in the kitchen. Once my wife called me to come see the bug in the silverware drawer. What is a bug doing in the silverware drawer? There is nothing for it to eat there. It was the mature larva of a carpet beetle. As I stood there wondering where it could have come from, I noticed the florescent ceiling light fixture above that had a few dead insects in the cover. Evidently the carpet beetle larva had fed on those dead dry insects until ready to pupate and looking for a more protected spot to go through its last developmental stage had dropped to the counter and into the silverware drawer. Did this mean we had a population of carpet beetles somewhere in the house? Not necessarily. The adults are good fliers and could have come to the house from a mouse nest or dead animal in the nearby woods. So, no matter how clean you keep your kitchen, you may still be invaded by carpet beetles. Hopefully, knowing about their life cycle and how they live will help you to control them no matter where you find them.



Varied Carpet Beetle - Adult (1/8 inch in length)



Mature Carpet Beetle larva ready to pupate (3/16" in length)