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FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND



Maikäfer – Cockchafer



Adult Maikäfer appear at the end of April or in May and live only for about five to seven weeks. After about two weeks, the female begins laying eggs, which she buries about 10 to 20 cm deep in the ground. She may do this several times until she has laid between 60 and 80 eggs.

The larvae, known as white grubs ("Engerling" in German) commonly feed on plant roots. The grubs develop in the ground for some three to four years, in colder climates even five years, and grow continually to a size of about 4–5 cm, before they pupate in early autumn and develop into a cockchafer in some six weeks.

The cockchafer overwinters in the ground at depths between 20 and 100 cm. They work their way to the surface only in spring.

Because of their long development time as larvae, cockchafers appear in a cycle of every three or four years; the years vary from region to region. There is a larger cycle of some 30 years superimposed, in which they occur (or rather, used to occur) in unusually high numbers.

Both the grubs and the beetles have a voracious appetite and thus have been and sometimes continue to be a major problem in agriculture and forestry.

In the pre-industrialized era, the main mechanism to control their numbers was to collect and kill the adult beetles, thereby interrupting the cycle. They were once very abundant: in 1911, more than 20 million individuals were collected in 18 km² of forest.

Collecting adults was an only moderately successful method. In the Middle Ages, pest control was rare, and

people had no effective means to protect their harvest. This gave rise to events that seem bizarre from a modern perspective. In 1320, for instance, cockchafers were brought to court in Avignon and sentenced to withdraw within three days onto a specially designated area, otherwise they would be outlawed. Subsequently, since they failed to comply, they were collected and killed.

In some areas and times, cockchafers were even served as food. A 19th century French recipe for cockchafer soup reads: "roast one pound of cockchafers without wings and legs in sizzling butter, then cook them in a chicken soup, add some veal liver and serve with chives on toast". Another recipe for cockchafers is to boil them for 10 mins and serve them hot with lemon juice in fresh pancakes.

Only with the modernization of agriculture in the 20th century and the invention of chemical pesticides did it become possible to effectively combat the cockchafer. Combined with the transformation of many pastures into agricultural land, this has resulted in a decrease of the cockchafer to near-extinction in some areas in Europe in the 1970s – hence the nostalgic chanson that made it into the top ten: "Es gibt keine Maikäfer mehr".

In recent years, the cockchafers' numbers have been increasing again, causing damage all over Europe. At present, no chemical pesticides are approved for use against cockchafers, and only biological measures are utilised for control: for instance, pathogenic fungi or nematodes that kill the grubs are applied to the soil.

I'd have my own Maikäfer memories, but as they are rather unsavoury I better keep them to myself. tb



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