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PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

Elephants at the Insectarium?

Biggest Beetle In New World Now On Display at Cincinnati Zoo

For the first time ever, the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden is displaying the rare South American elephant beetle (*Megasoma actaeon*). The massive males are the size of a man's fist, placing them among the World's biggest beetles, and sport horns appearing like an elephant's trunk and tusks. This appears to be the first time this fascinating species has been displayed and bred in North America.

In March of 1999, Randy Morgan, the Zoo's Invertebrate Conservation Program Manager, brought a single female elephant beetle back from an expedition to the Peruvian Amazon. She laid a dozen pearly eggs that soon hatched into small white grubs (larvae or immature stages). Then the real work began. Insectarium Keeper Karen Schmidt routinely provided the slowly growing grubs a specialized diet of freshly mixed compost and rotten wood; after three years they were bigger than bratwursts! Finally, the grubs built earthen cocoons and transformed (metamorphosed) into adult beetles.

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Elephant beetles occur in tropical rainforests throughout much of South America, but are rarely seen because they are uncommon and active mostly at night. Males typically are 2-3 times larger than females and use their horns to push and shove competing males away from food or potential mates. The smaller females, though still impressively sized, lack horns. The beetles naturally feed on ripe fallen fruit and sap flows. At the Insectarium, they get a choice selection of fresh tropical fruit splashed with real maple syrup!

Zoo visitors may already be familiar with the Hercules beetle, another giant horned beetle that the Insectarium has long bred and displayed. The even larger Elephant beetle, however, will be on public display only for a limited time. Morgan expects that a large male beetle and several females should be on exhibit for about the next six months.

Keeper Schmidt notes, "Rearing these rare giants from eggs took over three years of hard work. I really hope Zoo visitors take advantage of this special opportunity to see live elephant beetles up close and personal!"

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Editor's note: Photo opportunities with the elephant beetles are available. Please contact the Public Relations Department for more information.