

American Burying Beetle

Range: historically found throughout the eastern U.S.; now found in RI, MA, OK, SD, NE, KA, AR, and TX.

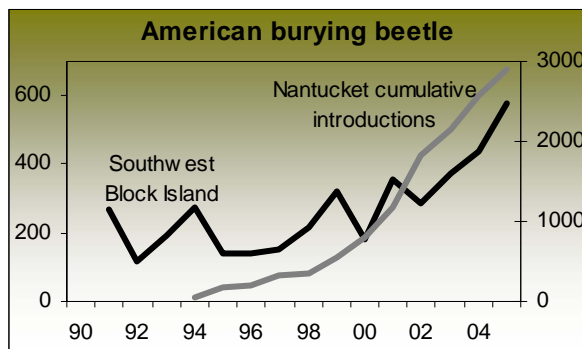
Endangered species listing: 1989
Federal recovery plans: 1991

Status since listing: Increased



The American burying beetle (*Nicrophorus americanus*) formerly occurred across a vast range from Nova Scotia south to Florida, west to Texas, and north to South Dakota. It was documented in 150 counties in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and three Canadian provinces. Total historical numbers may well have been in the tens of millions or larger. The burying beetle's dramatic decline has been called "difficult to imagine" and "one of the most disastrous declines of an insect's range ever to be recorded." It was extirpated from mainland New England through New Jersey by the 1920s, from the entire mainland east of the Appalachian Mountains by the 1940s, and from the mainland east of the Mississippi River by 1974. It is currently absent from about 90% of its historic range.

The cause of the beetle's decline remains a mystery, but its unique dependence upon large (for beetles) carrion lends credence to the theory that it dwindled due to a cascading disruption of the food chain caused by the extinction, extirpation and suppression of wolves, bears and mountain lions and the extinction of the passenger pigeon. At the time of listing in 1989, three populations were known: one on Block Island, RI and two in eastern Oklahoma. Since then, populations have been discovered in South Dakota (1995), Nebraska (1992), Kansas (1997), Arkansas (1992) and Texas (2003). It has been reintroduced to Massachusetts and Ohio and several captive breeding facilities have been established.



Northeast Highlight: Located 12 miles off the south coast of Rhode Island, Block Island supports the last natural population of the American Burying beetle east of the Mississippi River. It is free of foxes, raccoons, skunks and coyotes which elsewhere compete for carrion. A study of one-third of the population determined that it was relatively stable between 1991 and 1997,

then steadily grew to 577 adults in 2005. The population served as the source for the Roger Williams Park Zoo captive breeding which was initiated in 1994 and for direct translocations to Nantucket and Penikese Island.