

Death-Watch Beetle

(*Xestobium rufovillosum*)

Size

Adult 4-6mm, larva 0.5-8mm

Favourite Food

Hardwoods, typically oak, especially if it is damp or water-damaged

What to look for

Larva - Cream coloured, curved grub with dark brown head and short legs at front (seldom seen)

Adult - Long body, dusty dark brown with some yellow scales. Head almost hidden by helmet-like thorax

When the days are getting shorter and it is late afternoon and quiet in the museum, you hear a faint tapping sound. Could it be the **Death-Watch Beetle**?

Tell-tale signs:

- Exit-holes left by emerging adult beetles in wooden objects, floorboards or beams, about 3-4mm in diameter (much larger than furniture beetle holes).
- Small piles of droppings (frass) under the holes. This a yellowish, gritty dust with round pellets the size of a small pinhead.



Death-Watch Beetle [Gilles San Martin](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

Larva

For **up to 12 years** the young death-watch beetle grub, like a chubby, cream-coloured caterpillar, curled into a **half-moon shape**, is munching its way through the wood of some prized museum object or even the timbers of the building itself, but from **late spring onwards the adults emerge** and look for mates.

Adult Beetles

You may find the adult beetles **lying on the floor or windowsills**. They are larger than woodworm beetles and **look more dusty** as they have scattered yellowish scales on their brown backs. The head is almost hidden under the **triangular thorax**.

They will **probably have already mated and laid eggs** in cracks and holes, so action is necessary to prevent further damage to the collection and any timbers in the building. Water damage to wood, especially with fungal attack, makes the wood more attractive to death-watch beetle, so **be vigilant if you have had leaks or damp** in the building.

Top tips:

- Follow our guidelines on dealing with woodworm [here](#).
- If you are unsure about how to deal with any pests in your collection or store, contact a conservator (or Conservation Development Officer in the SW) for advice.

What do you need to do?

If you find death-watch beetles, piles of frass or holes in the **beams, floorboards or timbers** of your museum, **don't wait - get professional help** from a reputable woodworm specialist.

If you find larger holes in **wooden or wickerwork objects** don't panic, but do investigate further:

- Are the holes fresh and bright looking inside or dull and dark? **New exit holes will be clean and bright and need action.** Death-watch beetle holes are about twice the diameter of ordinary woodworm holes. Older holes will look dark and may have worn edges.
- Is there grainy wood dust falling out of the holes or in little piles beneath the object? The dust or frass can fall out of old holes when the object is moved. **If the holes and dust look bright or there are little piles under undisturbed objects, then the infestation is recent and needs action.**
- Are there **large dark brown beetles** in the area (dead or alive)? Then you need to take action. Isolate the objects, then freeze them out!
- **Then follow our [step by step resource for treating woodworm](#).** Death-watch beetles can eat through a thin sheet of polythene, so wrap your objects in acid-free tissue, then in **bubblewrap**, with the bubble side inwards. This seems to confuse them.



Xestobium rufovillosum [Sarefo](#) CC BY-SA 2.5

See our associated guides to identifying and treating museum pests on our [resources page](#).

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