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Rare stag beetles fetch up to R20 000

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Rich collectors pay millions of dollars for an Impressionist painting, tens of thousands of pounds for rare postage stamps like the Penny Black or hundreds of euros for a vintage bottle of wine, so why not R20 000 or more for a single beetle specimen?

That's the going price for some of the 15-odd species of Cape mountain stag beetles in the genus Colophon, which will almost certainly have been poached.

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The Colophons are all endemic - they occur naturally only here - to mountain peaks in the south-eastern parts of the Western Cape.

One species found in the Oudtshoorn area is listed as "critically endangered", another is "endangered", and at least four others are listed as "vulnerable", according to the Red Data Book of Beetles.

South Africa has listed all the Colophon stag beetles on Appendix III of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), which means



that they may not be exported - even across provincial boundaries within the country - without a permit.

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Scientists are required to get an additional collector's permit if they want to study these fascinating creatures, which have endured since before the break-up of the ancient super-continent of Gondwanaland and survived at least two ice ages.

But there is concern that poachers feeding a vibrant collectors' market, particularly in Europe and Japan, are taking a major toll on beetle numbers.

Mike Picker of the University of Cape Town's zoology department said thousands of beetles, including Colophons, were being illegally exported from South Africa each year.

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Even a few scientists collected the insects for export without the required permits, he added.

"Beetle collecting has been going on for a hundred years in Europe, where it's a popular pastime, and in Japan, where there are a huge number of devotees.

"There is a huge illegal trade and the traditionally rare species command high prices - it's like stamp collecting, where people just have to have possession of rare things.

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"As far as I know, there have been prices up to R20 000 for a single specimen."

The Colophon beetles all occurred at high altitudes, Picker explained. Six species are found only on the peaks of mountains in the Swartberg range of the Little Karoo. ar ✕

another species is found only in the Langeberg mountains.

One Cape stag beetle species is found on Table Mountain and elsewhere in the Western Cape fold mountains.

"Typically they have been collected by mountaineers, some of whom have been implicated in illegal sales although not actually prosecuted," Picker said.

He described the stag beetles as "fairly nondescript" and mostly of a dark brown or blackish colour, about two centimetres in length.

"The males have enlarged jaws, of which the Oudtshoorn species is the most spectacular.

"The Colophons are considered very rare, but they are nocturnal - although they are occasionally seen during misty 'tablecloth' mornings - so they may be more common than is supposed."

Little is known about the biology of these beetles, other than that the adults appear in summer to mate and lay eggs. When the eggs hatch, the larvae remain in the soil for several years and are extremely difficult to find.

Colophons are believed to feed on the roots of restios.

"Very few exist in South African collections, although obviously a lot are being collected, and this is the right time of year to collect them."

Four German men were arrested at a roadblock near Ceres earlier this month after being found with a large number of beetles in their possession, allegedly without permits.

Nature conservation officials and police searched a guest house at Ladysmith in the Little Karoo where the Germans had been staying and found several hundred more beetles of many different species - including stag beetles - also all allegedly collected without permits.

The Germans, who are on bail of R5 000 each, will appear in the Paarl regional court on Monday for plea and trial in connection with charges under the Western Cape Nature Conservation Ordinance of hunting, possessing and transporting protected species without permits.

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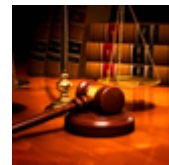
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