

The secret stages of the stag beetle

1 It is the end of May and a male stag beetle flies out into the world for the first time. He is in search of a female to mate. At least four years old, he will soon die after mating.

Female stag beetles look and behave very differently to males. They have smaller pincers and, unlike males, are often seen walking about, during the day.

There are usually more males so they often fight for females.

2 After mating the female stag beetle will choose



Female stag beetle

a suitable decaying piece of wood.

She will carefully prepare her nursery under the soil next to the piece of wood and lay her egg. Soon after she will die.

In about three weeks tiny grubs will hatch from the eggs. They will feed in their carefully prepared bed, later feeding on the wood.

3 The hatched larvae are very greedy and may spend three years (sometimes even longer!) feeding on decaying roots and wood under the ground.

They are blind, with a shiny rigid head and very sharp wood-eating pincers.

4 Not all parts of the larvae grow at the same rate. The head is rigid and grows slower than the flexible body which expands like a balloon. In order for the head to catch up in size with the body, the larvae must go through a moult.

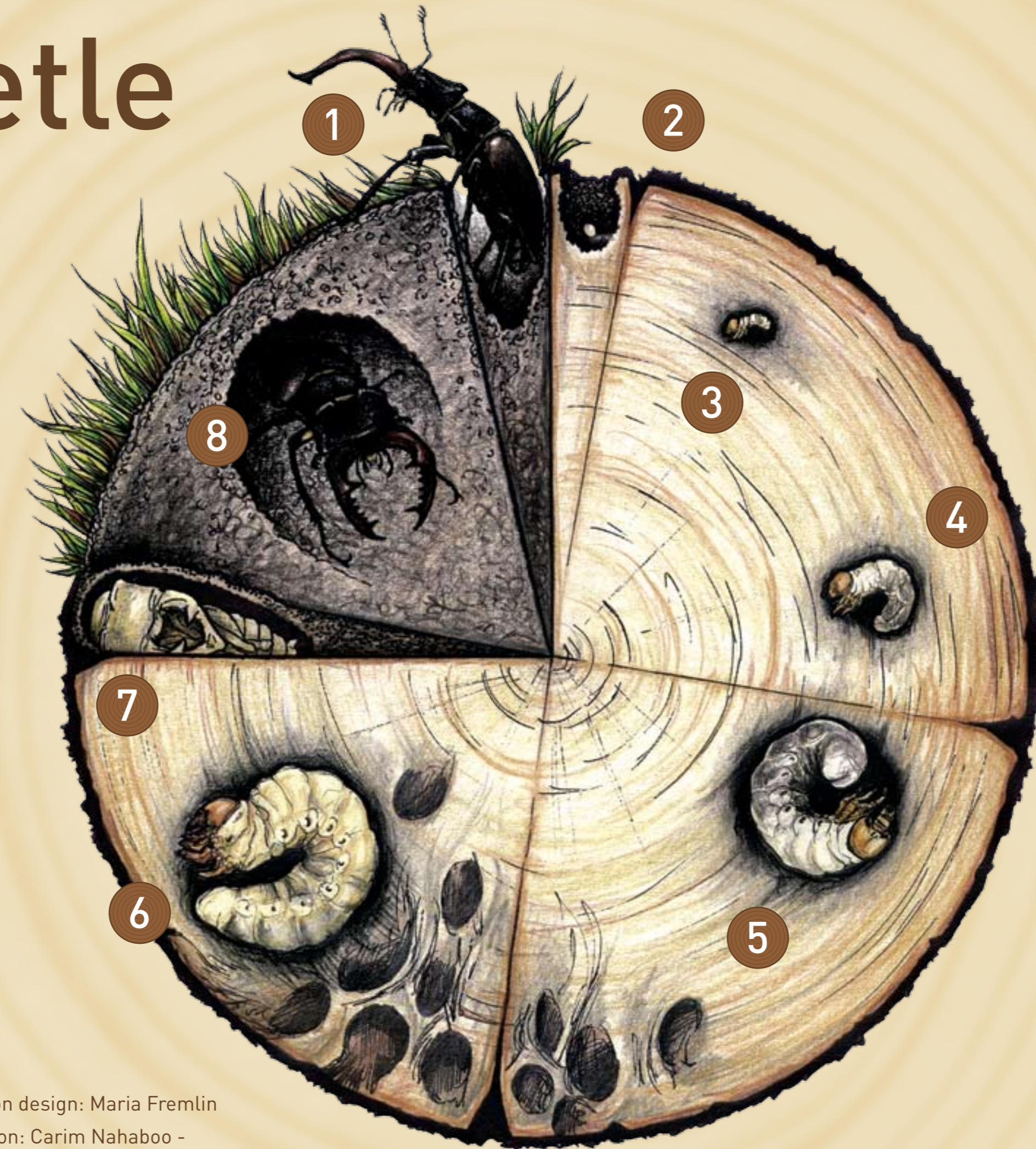


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Depending on the quality of the wood this moult may happen in the first year.

5 Providing they've had a good supply of quality wood, by the age of one the larvae should have moulted again.

All the larvae has to do now is to store enough fat reserves for its short life in the adult stage.

6 The fat larvae is now the size of a grown-up's thumb.

Its colour is now creamy as its fat reserves are now visible under the skin.

At the beginning of the summer it stops eating wood and buries itself deep into the soil.

7 In the soil the larvae makes a nice compact chamber.



Mating stag beetles

Inside it undergoes a complete transformation called a metamorphosis.

This takes three to six weeks, a short time in a stag beetle's life cycle.

8 Eventually a grown up male stag beetle emerges from the pupa, now called an imago.

But the stag beetle waits patiently in its chamber until next year when the weather warms.

Now, after at least four years, we are back to the beginning with the male beetle flying out to mate.