

A Day in the Life of a Female Dung Beetle

Don't be put off by my name. Missus *Dung Beetle*. I didn't choose it. It's how I make my living.

I am a roller but some of my friends are tunnellers.

As rollers, our legs are adapted to the task of rolling dung. My legs are long and strong. This is what my tunneling friends lack. Their legs are much shorter than mine. However, their heads are well equipped for the task of tunneling.

After a morning spent flying up-wind through the refreshing African mist, I found a suitable pad while the air was still cool. The distinct scent of butanone, among other essences, is what caught my attention. Once landed on the pad, I checked out the competition. I chose a suitable male already in the process of making a masterpiece. Though some of us female dung beetles can release our own perfume, it's usually up to the males. An intriguing head-stand is even performed by some of the eager males.

My partner was strong and capable looking. Plus, he had already begun the task at hand, which impressed me greatly. I helped him finalize the ball's features. It was not easy. The sound of my fellow beetles moulding their work was getting louder and louder as the pile quickly diminished. Tensions were rising. The herd had moved on, so if we were not successful in creating a ball here, we would have to follow the scent and fly elsewhere. Luckily for me though, my partner was well-equipped and able to ward off those who tried to steal our work.

However, the real mission comes next; to get our masterpiece to a suitable location. I will soon have to lay. Once I have my young, I will devote all of my time to raising them. I cannot do this unless our destination is reached. My mate may even help me raise the young. But this is wishful thinking, we must first be successful in getting to our destination.

My mate will let me rest for most of the intense journey, clinging to the ball he made and will now roll until we reach a suitable location to make our home.

Our journey began quite well, I was impressed with the strength of my mate and quite pleased with my ability to choose a "good one". As the sun rises higher in the sky, our spirits are changing. It's growing hotter and hotter. I notice my partner stopping a lot more than usual to look for the path. We are meant to be going in a straight line so I don't understand his confusion. And, of course, being of the male orientation, he refuses to ask for any directions.

I can feel my back ready to crack under the African sun. All around us is a vast sheet of golden hot sand. It seems endless. The skyscrapers of green leaves and boulders of pebbles and sand are difficult to maneuver around.

My mate's legs are burning in the sand as he rolls the ball I cling on to. Every once in a while I get a brief relief as I am tossed in the shade as my mate diligently rolls us towards our haven. It's not looking good. Survival is slipping away like the sand beneath us.

We must push the ball to a suitable location before it gets too hot for us to survive; even if it means abandoning our masterpiece. We take a break. My partner cleans his sandy face with his legs. He is tense, I can smell his stress. Although I usually adore the great yellow sphere above that guides us, it can be cruel and put us under strain. I long for the cool midnight sky with its new scents and sounds.

Finally, the sun disappears and gives us some relief. It dips below the lip of the equator in a shimmering exit. Now, we must tune into a new map; the beautiful glow of earth's polarizing pattern. The tracing is ablaze and directs us to our safe harbour.

Every once in a while we check that we are following the right path. Standing high on our masterpiece we survey the sky and once we see our path as directed by the new stellar ceiling above, we follow its guidance.

I can smell it. I wait for confirmation from my partner but I think he sees it too. We are close. We can bury our nest before the scorching sphere rises again on the African horizon. My partner must be tired. But his task is now complete, it is up to me to follow up on my half of the bargain.

Happy with our final stop, we begin digging into the cool sand, now smooth and refreshing as we swipe it over our backs. Our masterpiece is nestled beneath the surface, it joins part of this majestic plain, full of other animals like us, fulfilling our fate. I complete my duty proudly. I can hardly keep in my excitement. I wait with my partner, wondering if he will now desert me or stay to help raise our brood.

We have completed our purpose. Our young will go on to fulfill their missions and reach their individual harbours. I glimpse at my mate and we both gaze up, taking in the twinkling blue celestial map above us, grateful for nature's guidance.