

Looking for Walking Leaves

Have you seen a walking leaf? The Australian Insect Farm is looking for insect enthusiasts to help them track down the king of camouflage – the Leaf Insect.



Insects are the most abundant and diverse group of animals in the world and dominate virtually all of the freshwater and terrestrial environments. There are an estimated 10 million species world-wide. In Australia we know of over 140,000 species of native insects – and only about a third of them have been described (named). The Wet Tropics region is rich with insect life and many researchers continue to study this region.

Researching this myriad of insect species can be difficult. Many insects are capable of blending in with their immediate surroundings and the most perfect example of camouflage is the Leaf Insect – Phyllium.

As the name suggests, Leaf Insects have an amazing leaf-like appearance which renders them almost impossible to find. They completely resemble the leaf on which they rest, even having leaf-like veins and mid-rib markings to match. They are generally green in colour but may also have brown markings that resemble dead spots on the leaf. While leaf insects are in the Phasmid family they are unlike their relatives, the stick insects, which mostly look like twigs. Instead, leaf insects have exceptionally flattened bodies and their legs have noticeable leaf-like flanges.

All leaf insects are plant feeders, living on a wide variety of trees and shrubs. They are not very active insects, resting amongst the foliage and branches during the day and moving about to feed at night. Their movements are slow and they rely upon their resemblance to leaves to protect them from predators. This protection is only effective as long as the insect remains motionless.

In Australia leaf insects are poorly known. They have been rarely observed and records show only a hand full of specimens. To date, specimens have been recorded from the rainforests of north Queensland with localities of Innisfail, Cairns, Mt. Lewis and the Atherton Tableland.

As this insect is so cryptic in its appearance, research has been relatively slow. To gain a better understanding of this insect we need much more information. With the assistance of volunteer insect enthusiasts, further records of this insect can be gathered.

At the Australian Insect Farm we have been studying leaf insects since 1987. If you come across a leaf insect and you would like to assist this research project make sure you record complete notes on your sightings. Such details as the location you saw the insect, when you saw it, what habitat type, if possible the plant species on which the insect was observed and the names of any other plant species growing close by. The aim is to expand the known distribution and life history data of this species.

Sue Hasenpusch, Wet Tropics newspaper, 2001.