

Stick Insects and Praying Mantids - Masters of Camouflage

In any garden the most commonly seen insect would be a butterfly as it boldly displays its brilliant colours. But not all insects are as obvious in their display. We often don't see the other inhabitants in our gardens, not only because of their usually small size but even some of the large insects will not easily be seen. This is mainly due to 'CAMOUFLAGE', an adaptation to their environment which enables them to successfully hide. This is not only useful to avoid being eaten but for some insects camouflage assists them in their predatory role.

WALKING STICKS

Stick insects are experts in camouflage. Sometimes called 'walking sticks' because of their usually long thin stick or leaf like appearance with long slender legs, enabling them to walk on the ground. Some stick insects do have wings while others have short wings and are unable to fly.



In regards to the length, stick insects are among the tropics largest insects, some have been recorded at more than 30 cm. A more recent discovery has been a stick insect, female overall length over 60 cm.

Using their ability to camouflage is the main survival key for stick insects. Once moving, a walking stick is easily spotted, not only by ourselves but by predators such as the Crested Hawk, of which has a diet containing stick insects.

To avoid this predation, stick insects mostly live in amongst the foliage of shrubs and trees with some species living on the ground. All have met their individual habitat camouflage requirements.

Stick insects eat leaves, feeding mostly at night. A large variety of trees and shrubs are used as food plants by the many different types of stick insects. Like other insects found eating such a similar leaf diet, this is nature's pruning at work. Stick insects are rarely a problem to the trees or shrubs in the backyard situation.

Although they can look daunting, common backyard stick insects are completely harmless and actually very docile in action.

PRAYING MANTIDS

An insect often confused as being a stick insect is the Praying Mantid, in fact it is a carnivorous insect, eating live prey. Mantids can be easily recognised as they have specially adapted front legs which have rows of spines and are used for catching and holding prey.



Mantids live in all different habitat ranges with the most commonly encountered preying mantid usually a leafy green or brown colour. When sitting in amongst the foliage such colour variation allows a mantid to hide while waiting motionless for prey to come close. Camouflage for the praying mantid is the key to their success as a predator.

Mantids mainly eat insects. They will catch and eat prey appropriate to their own size, which can range from as small as 10 mm to the largest in Australia reaching 150mm in length. Large mantids eat large prey such as grasshoppers, flies, caterpillars and even butterflies. While smaller mantids eat smaller prey such as grasshoppers, fruit flies and aphids. Mantids are active both day and night.

Encountering a mantid in the garden is completely safe. When approached, a mantid will attempt to grab with the front hooked legs which results in no more than a minor spike to the finger.

Although praying mantids are in the often unfavoured 'predator' group, we should not automatically look at them as 'bad bugs', Praying mantids are very beneficial in the garden. By eating live prey they assist in maintaining a natural balance with the insect world living in your garden.

Our gardens are host to a myriad of insects, yet we are often unaware of their existence, they are there all the time, we just don't see them, that is camouflage.