



Praying Mantids

Mantids are among the largest insects found in western North America. They are slow-moving ambush predators and feed on moderate-sized insects, particularly flies, moths, crickets and butterflies. Several species in the genus *Stagmomantis* are common in and around cities in California. Mantids can attain a body length of 3-5 inches. They generally have two pairs of wings, which are held folded over the back of the abdomen unless the mantid is alarmed or is preparing to take flight. The front wings are narrow and leathery, the hindwings are large and fan-shaped and are kept folded fan-like beneath the front wings. The distinctively enlarged *raptorial* front legs are used for catching and holding prey insects. They are held up in front of the head giving the appearance that the insect is praying. Mantids only feed on live insects.

During courtship, females kill and at least partly consume the male. In fact, for some

species, mating may be successful only if the female eats the male's head.

Mantid eggs are deposited in the fall in large masses. These egg masses are enclosed in a hard brown paper-like material, and are attached to twigs or on other surfaces. Mantids overwinter as eggs. In the spring, young mantid nymphs emerge from the egg mass. Immature mantids are miniature copies of adults, but without wings. In northern California and the Central Valley, adults only live one year. The adults eventually die when cold weather begins, partly because of the cold temperatures but largely because insect prey disappears.

Although nurseries often sell mantid eggs for biological control of garden pests, mantids are not particularly effective as biological control agents. Mantids are indiscriminate predators and will eat any insect they can catch whether it is a pest species or a beneficial one. In addition, they do not eat sufficient numbers of prey to make them good control agents.

