

## Praying Mantises



Typical mantid egg case.

Mantises are among the largest insects found in western North America. They are slow-moving ambush predators, feeding on moderate-sized insects, particularly flies, moths, crickets and butterflies. Several species, in the genus *Stagmomantis*, are common in and around cities in California.

Mantises can reach a body length of 3-5 inches. They generally have two pairs of wings, although these 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 held folded fan-like beneath the front wings. Adult males can fly but adult females are too heavy to fly. The distinctively enlarged front legs are used to capture and hold prey insects. These legs are held up in front of the head giving the appearance that the insect is praying. Mantises only feed on live insects.

Female mantises are reputed to kill and at least partly consume males during courtship. In fact this may be an urban myth. It turns out that only really hungry females will do this and successful mating does not depend on the male losing his head.

Mantis 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 other surfaces. Immature mantises are miniature copies of adults, but without wings. In this region mantids only live one year. They eventually die when cold weather begins, partly because of the cold temperatures but

largely because their prey insects disappear during the winter. Mantises overwinter in the egg stage.

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



Adult female mantid (right); photo by Kathy Keatley Garvey.