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Praying mantises are one of the world’s most fascinating insects. Not only do they look interesting, with their unique forelegs tucked up under their heads as if they’re praying, but they’re also known for a pretty creepy reproductive trait—sexual cannibalism. In this article, we’ll be sharing some of the most interesting praying mantis facts, as well as their life cycle, their macabre mating habits, and whether or not these little predators pose any danger to humans. Fun Fact 1: Praying Mantises Are Unique Insects We'll start with some basic praying mantis facts. Praying mantises are an order of insects, meaning they are six-legged invertebrates with exoskeletons, segmented bodies, and jointed legs. Their most defining trait is their forelegs, which are quite large and bent. These legs are typically held up and under the head, making it look as though the creatures are praying. "Praying mantis" may refer to all mantises, as they all hold their legs in a similar fashion, or to the specific species Mantis religiosa. The latter use is primarily in Europe, whereas the rest of the world uses "mantis" and "praying mantis" interchangeably. There are over 2,400 species of mantis, with most found in tropical, subtropical, and temperate regions. Many are found in the Mediterranean, African, and Asian areas, though climate change has broadened their habitat and many species have been introduced into new aroes as an attempt at pest control. Because there are so many varieties, there is a lot of variation in size and color. They may be green, brown, white, and even pink, and range from half an inch to 6 inches long depending on species. Mantises may live anywhere between four weeks and one year. Praying mantises are primarily diurnal, meaning they are active during the day. But males in particular may be more active at night. Because some of their biggest predators are birds, moving by night is actually safer for the mantis. They even have a special organ that can detect the echolocation calls of bats, helping them get away before they're eaten. Mantises are formidable predators. That leads many people to wonder whether they're dangerous toward humans as well. Though a mantis may bite a human, they have no venom and won't leave any lasting damage—bites may draw a couple drops of blood, but that's unlikely. Fun Fact 2: Praying Mantises Have 5 Eyes and Spiked Legs Though its legs might be its most famous feature, the praying mantis' head is also quite distinctive. Some species can turn their heads 180 degrees to keep an eye on both predators and prey. The head has a triangular shape, with two large compound eyes and three simple eyes located between them. The mantis' eyes are capable of stereopsis, a fancy form of three-dimensional vision that lets the mantis see movement that's undetectable by humans. The mantis' eyes are very important, as it hunts primarily by sight. Once it has prey in sight, a mantis will track its prey by keeping its eyes fixed on it and moving its head to follow. That way, the prey is always centered in its field of vision. Its mandibles are formidable, too—they're strong enough to rip its prey apart, and it typically uses them to cut food into smaller pieces as it tears it from its prey's body. The mantis has a long thorax that makes it look as though the creature has a long neck. The prothorax, or the back part of the thorax, is very flexible, which makes it so that the mantis can move its head and forelimbs without moving the rest of its body. This is especially important because its forelegs are its main method of hunting. The forelegs are spiked raptorial legs, referring to a type of insect leg that allows grasping of prey. In the mantis' case, they lash out toward prey with these two legs, taking only 50 to 70 milliseconds to snatch prey from the air—about six times faster than the blink of an eye. These forelegs have spines and tooth-like spikes to grab prey. While most species have only a handful of spikes, some have around 30, giving them additional hold on their food. The forelegs are also used for walking and grabbing onto things other than food, especially when a mantis jumps from one branch to another. As mentioned, there are over 2,400 types of mantises in the world, some of which have wings and some of which do not. If a mantis does have wings, the front set work as camouflage and a shield for the delicate back wings. Though males and females both have wings, female mantises do not generally fly as they are too heavy for their wings to hold them up. There are four categories of mantises, assigned by wing type: Macropterous (long-winged) Brachypterous (short-winged) Micropterous (vestigial-winged) Apterous (wingless) Fun Fact 3: Praying Mantises Ambush Their Prey What do praying mantises eat? Praying mantises are carnivores, meaning they eat other animals. Their primary food source is other arthropods, or insects, spiders, and similar creatures, but they may also eat lizards, frogs, small birds, and fish if the opportunity arises. Larger mantises will also eat smaller mantises if they're available. Mantises eat their prey alive. Since they have no venom, they simply reach out with their spiky forelegs, catching prey in their spines so it can't get free. They dig in without killing the creature, holding onto it tightly so it doesn't get away. Mantises are hunters, typically attacking by ambushing or stalking prey. Some are well-camouflaged in their environment, while others count on just remaining very still until prey happens by. However, they may also stalk creatures, following them and moving out of sight until they spot the right opportunity to attack. A few species may run over the ground in search of prey, but it is far more common for mantises to hide and wait for their food to come to them. Some species have particularly large guts, which can hold food for later digestion. Though their long forelegs are perfect for catching food, they're only good for reaching outward, so if prey or an enemy gets too close, those legs are basically useless. Fun Fact 4: Praying Mantises Participate in Sexual Cannibalism The praying mantis reproductive system is one of the main things that fascinates people about the creatures. That's mostly because mantises exhibit sexual cannibalism, meaning that the female mantis will sometimes eat her mate after, or even during, the mating process. The mating cycle begins in the fall for temperate climates, or year-round in tropical climates, with the female sending out pheromones to attract mates. Males approach, but are generally cautious about it—male mantises are smaller than females, and females require a great deal of energy to produce eggs. If they see a male as a food source rather than as a prospective mate, they will eat him before he gets a chance to mate. If he's able, the male will jump onto the female's back and deposit sperm into a special chamber. Mating can go on for several hours, even if the female bites the male's head off in the process. Mating movement is controlled by a ganglion—a group of nerves—located in the abdomen, so if the male's head is bitten off, the necessary movement can still continue. Females are not particularly bothered by mating, despite some 25% of mating attempts ending in the female consuming the male. They may continue hunting during the process, helping fuel egg production. It used to be believed that females bit the head off of males because the heads were unnecessary for copulation, allowing them to get nutrients and be mated with at the same time. More recent research suggests that sexual cannibalism occurs more often in captivity, with stress from researcher viewing prompting the behavior. It's also been demonstrated that females with lower-quality diets are more likely to consume their mates. Interestingly, in one study in which the mantises were left undisturbed, Chinese mantises fed before mating had courtship rituals—males would dance for their prospective partners, shifting their interest from eating to mating. Some 90% of predatory mantis species participate in sexual cannibalism. Some species, such as Tenodera sinensis, are quite good at escaping cannibalism. Around 83% of males escape being eaten, but the odds go down with each subsequent mating. Because mating is so frequent, many males will likely be eaten anyway. While this practice might seem counterproductive, sexual cannibalism might actually have a surprising benefit for male mantises. Studies have shown that male mantises that are consumed during mating pass on more of their genetic material to the offspring, suggesting that sexual cannibalism is an evolutionary benefit. All that extra nutrition comes in handy for the female mantis, as she'll lay potentially hundreds of eggs. The number of praying mantis eggs varies between 10 and 400, depending on what species a mantis is. Praying mantis eggs are laid in a foamy, brown secretion called ootheca, which grows hard and protects the eggs from damage and predation. Most species die shortly after laying the eggs, but a few may guard and protect them before they hatch. Praying mantis eggs stay in the ootheca through autumn and winter and hatch in spring as baby praying mantises called nymphs (rather than pupas or caterpillars). These nymphs may mimic the look of ants to further protect themselves. However, they look very similar to adult mantises, and in fact molt between five and 10 times before they reach their adult size. Though the mating process is the same for most species, a few have different traits. The Brunner's stick mantis reproduces parthenogenetically—no males of the species have been observed, and instead the female produces an embryo without a fertilized egg. Two other species are also able to reproduce parthenogenetically but typically reproduce sexually. Fun Fact 5: Praying Mantises Have Unique Ways of Defending Against Predators With so many species of mantises, there are a lot of variations in color, size, and other features. Different mantis species have many unique adaptations, helping them hide from or fight off predators in a variety of settings. Mantises are a favorite food for frogs, lizards, birds, spiders, hornets, and ants. Fire ants are a particularly formidable enemy. Because they work collectively, they can take down a mantis without much trouble. The mantis' extended forelegs aren't much use against one ant, let alone dozens, as they swarm in with a painful bite that discharges a paralyzing venom. The fire ants freeze the mantis in place and devour it as part of a swarm, giving it no chance to escape. However, mantises are not without defense against predators. Their biggest defense is camouflage—many are green or brown to blend in with leaves and sticks, while others are pink to blend in with orchid petals. Because they are ambush hunters, they are able to stand still for long periods of time, helping hide them from predators while hunting. Some mantises are even very flat, thereby limiting the shadows they cast in the sun so they're even harder to see. Select species have even adapted to turn colors with the seasons. One species turns black during the dry season to blend in with trees burned by brush fires. When mantises are the object of predation, they have a few other defenses. If approached by a potential predator, the mantis will typically stand up and spread out its forelegs and wings to make itself look larger. Some have colors or patterns on their exoskeleton to further ward off enemies. A mantis can strike or pinch predators with its spiked forelegs. It may also bite—though its mandibles are small, they're sharp and pointed enough to do damage to many enemies. They may also make a hissing sound by pushing air out of their abdominal spiracles. However, all of this is bluffing. The mantis has no chemical protection. If attacked, it can fight back with its forelegs and mandibles but not venom or bitter-tasting chemicals. A mantis has to count on scaring enemies away by looking frightening or by hurting them enough to make them back off. Fun Fact 6: There Are Thousands of Praying Mantis Varieties With over 2,400 species of mantis in the world, there are some truly unique varieties out there, and they come with fascinating praying mantis facts. Mydriatic/Wikimedia Commons Ghost Mantis The ghost mantis is known for its unique dark brown appearance, which resembles dry leaves. One of this mantis' most interesting features is the asymmetrical cone on its head, which appears like a twisted, dry leaf. Ghost mantises are a common choice for pets because they are unlikely to cannibalize one another. Provided they are given adequate food and space, ghost mantises can be bred in captivity without danger of them fighting or killing each other. Basile Morin/Wikimedia Commons Jeweled Flower Mantis The jeweled flower mantis is another popular choice for pet owners. Male mantises are slightly over an inch long, whereas females get a bit larger. They are generally lime green, brown, or similar shades, but have a unique eye marking on the back of their shell, which can be used to confuse predators. This mantis likes hiding in orchid blooms, holding still until prey comes close enough to snatch. It also has one of the most flexible thoraxes in the mantis order, as it can turn its head more than almost any other insect. Though it might look dull at first glance other than its eye markings, when it spreads its wings the mantis' beautiful coloring can be seen. Its wings are often pink or red and blue, making its defensive posture particularly beautiful. Cannibalism is a trait among jeweled flower mantis females, but males are generally able to get along with one another without trouble. harum.koh/Wikimedia Commons Giant Asian Mantis The giant Asian mantis is, unsurprisingly, the largest species of mantis. They average around 7 centimeters long for males and 10 centimeters for females. Giant Asian mantises are also common pets. They range in color from green to brown and yellow, and they change color over a few days to suit their environments. These mantises are more likely to hunt prey than other species thanks to their large size. They generally don't wait for prey to come to them and instead stalk them through their environment. Because they are more inclined to hunting than other species, it's difficult to keep many of them together, as they'll hunt one another until only one is left. Females often prey on males, so mating them in captivity must be done carefully to ensure the male's safety. Luc Viatour/Wikimedia Commons Walking Flower Mantis The walking flower mantis is one of the smallest and most beautiful examples of the order. At around 3 centimeters in length, these tiny creatures hide in orchid blossoms. Their light coloring mimics the color and texture of orchid flowers, hiding them from prey and luring pollinators in as potential food. The walking flower mantis also rocks back and forth as it waits, mimicking the way flowers sway in the wind. To attack, it can fling itself into the air—something many mantises do not do. Its beautiful coloring makes it a popular choice as a pet, but the walking flower mantis is rarer than many species and therefore much more expensive. Fun Fact 7: Praying Mantises Pose No Danger to Humans Though praying mantises are dangerous to their prey, they represent no danger to humans. Many people who see them wonder, "Do praying mantises bite?" And while they may chomp on a person's hand if they're approached aggressively, their bites are rare and do little damage. Mantises are actually sought after as natural pest control for gardeners. However, because mantises feed indiscriminately, they may eat as many good bugs as they do bad ones. That can make them a nuisance to some gardeners. For people who just simply don't like bugs, having a praying mantis in their yard might outweigh the benefits of having a harmless predator, and they might wish to get rid of them. If you find the number of mantises in your yard overwhelming, they can be safely removed by grabbing them with gloved hands and transporting them elsewhere. They can also be killed, though since they are predators of harmful bugs, it's preferable to relocate them instead of killing them. Despite rumors, it is not illegal or punishable in any way to kill a mantis—that comes from superstition and folklore, not any legal source. If you do want to get rid of mantises entirely, you can spray your garden with soapy water, which keeps insects out of your garden. If there are no insects nearby, mantises will leave in search of food. Increasing the number of natural predators for the mantis, such as frogs or birds, is also a great way to get rid of them. Mantises are not particularly susceptible to chemical pesticides. If you find that they're a problem, try to address their food availability by getting rid of smaller insects, or attract more predators with bird feeders and ponds. Fun Fact 8: Praying Mantises Are the Subject of Many Myths Praying mantises are the source of many interesting stories and folklore from cultures around the world. Even the word mantis comes from the ancient Greek word for "seer" or "prophet," emphasizing how these creatures have been viewed. In the Greek tradition, mantises were believed to lead lost travelers home. Other cultures view the creature differently. The Khoi and San people of Africa both revered the mantis, calling it Hottentotsgot, meaning "god of the Khoi." For the San, the mantis was one manifestation of a trickster god, giving it a somewhat mischievous reputation. DatBot/Wikimedia Commons Fun Fact 9: The Mantis Inspired 2 Martial Arts Styles Because the mantis is such an efficient hunter, it's also been the inspiration for two distinct Chinese martial arts forms: the Northern Praying Mantis style and the Southern Praying Mantis style. Despite having similar names, they developed independently of one another. The Northern style is primarily inspired by the mantis' aggressiveness. The style makes use of many quick, circular attacks inspired by the mantis' unique foreleg attacks. These quick attacks are followed by precise, targeted attacks at vital organs. Interestingly, the Northern style is often used to characterize antagonists in media. Northern Praying Mantis style appears prominently in films such as Dance of the Drunk Mantis, The Forbidden Kingdom, and even Kung Fu Panda, where the Northern-style student is a literal praying mantis. Southern Praying Mantis style has different traits. In this style, fighters favor close-range fighting with short bursts of power. They primarily use their hands and arms, with just a few kicks. This style originated with the Hakka people of China, and there are many variations of it. It has a variety of origin stories, but many come back to its invention by the Hakka people, with some stating that the name comes from one family trying to hide their political affiliations by naming their martial arts after the northern style. The Southern Praying Mantis style isn't quite as popular in media, but it can be seen in Avatar: The Last Airbender's Toph Beifong, who fights in this style rather than the Hung Ga style of other earthbenders. Southern Praying Mantis also appears in the film Invincible Shaolin as well as in G.I. Joe cartoons. What's Next? Want to learn more about another common, helpful garden arthropod? Check out this article on the garden spider, which, despite its creepy appearance, can be very helpful to gardeners. Praying mantises are the subject of many urban myths, just like the camel spider. Is it as terrifying as you've heard? Praying mantises are fascinating examples of how animals biologically adapt to their needs. If you're interested in biology, why not read through this AP Biology syllabus to find out if it's the right class for you?

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