

# In My Backyard Praying Mantis Or, Preying Mantis?



**Female and Male Carolina Mantis**

Being a third or fourth grader in Marathon during the 1950s meant that you got one of the best teachers you would have in your life. Mrs. Audie Reed, whose husband was a professor at Sul Ross, would drive every day from Alpine to teach our third and fourth graders. And, what a great teacher she was!

She believed in class projects and play acting to demonstrate the skills or lessons. Studying the Arab states, she brought a friend who had taught in Saudi Arabia for years, with her collection of Arabic art, camel saddles, etc. But instead of hearing a long-winded lecture, we dressed up in sheets like Bedouins and sat around a fake campfire with cellophane flames, eating boiled dates. Yeah, that kind of teacher.

All year we put on plays and skits, and when we went to the playground,



***Arizona mantis female and male.***

we collected rocks, leaves and interesting pieces of nature. Once, we found a funny little egg case stuck to a twig, so we brought it in and she identified it as a praying mantis egg case. She stuck it on the steeple of the cardboard church we had built for our Easter play, and one day, the eggs hatched and hundreds of tiny praying mantises were climbing everywhere. This began a lifelong interest in education for me, in particular, the study of insects.

But, back to today's subject. Of all the questionable things I have found in my backyard, the Praying Mantis is, without doubt, the most beneficial insect out there. They don't bite, sting or hurl venom at you, unlike most other creatures in our part of the world...to humans they are harmless. But in the garden and the yard, they are one of the chief predators of the bugs that bug us.

We are lucky to have several species of mantids, most notably *Stagmomantus limbata*, the bordered or Arizona mantis, and *Stagmomantus carolina*, the Carolina mantis.

Carolina is a smaller insect, the adult female being two to two and one-third inches in length and the male coming in at two and one-eighth inches. The females have a large abdomen, shorter wings and are poor flyers...the males are slim with long wings and are strong flyers. Coloration of the Carolina varies from bright green to gray to brown. The markings on their bodies make good camouflage, and sneak attack is their mode of operation.

The Arizona mantis is generally larger than Carolina and can grow up to three inches in length. Their coloration runs from green to beige, and discerning the difference between Carolina and Arizona can be difficult. The eyes of Arizona do not protrude as far as Carolina, giving them less of a bug-eyed look, but the triangular head of both makes them look like aliens in a scifi B movie. The female Arizonas are usually plain green with a black spot in the middle of their back on the wing covering. When in flight, the



***Mantid egg sac, or, ootheca.***

open wings may have a checkered design or yellow striping. Males are very slender and usually gray, brown, green, or a combination of these colors. The male wings are transparent with brownish spots. Mantids in general can alter their coloration to match their background, to a degree, like chameleons.

All mantids have the ability to swivel their heads almost 360 degrees, and that, coupled with two large compound eyes and three simple eyes, enables them to have a wide range of vision.

Mantids are great mimics, not only with their coloration, but also mimicking the movement of plants in a light breeze, swaying back and forth. The Carolina has a leaf-like pattern to their wing covering, enabling them to mimic plants. The Orchid Mantis, not found here, looks exactly like the flowers it sits among, waiting to spring into action.

Mantids hold their forearms in a penitent position, thus giving rise to the name, "praying mantis." The legs fold like a pocket knife and are covered with thorny spikes with sharp hooks to help them hold their prey.

Mantids lay their eggs in the fall in an egg sac called an ootheca. The female lays some 300 eggs in a structure she exudes, then covers them with a shiny substance that hardens and protects the eggs. They winter over and hatch in the spring as tiny, wingless mantids, known as nymphs. They go through as many as 12 moltings before becoming adults. But from the beginning, they are predators, and will even eat their brothers and sisters if nothing else is available.

Mantids live from spring to fall and then mate. Sometimes, but not often,



***Carolina female and the leaf-like pattern of its wing coverings, enabling it to blend in with the surrounding plants...perfect camouflage.***

the female will eat the male's head during the mating process, but only if she is unusually hungry. A few weeks after laying the eggs the female dies, and the males usually last until first frost, unless eaten by the female during procreation. Unlike butterflies, mantids only produce one generation per year.

Mantids do not congregate, living their lives as loners. The cannibalism may be the reason for avoiding other adults.

Mantid adults and wingless nymphs feed on many insects, including the beneficial ones. They generally eat flies, crickets, moths and honey bees.

Mantid egg cases can be bought from gardening supply houses to set out in your yard to increase your mantid population.

So, for once we have a creature that only gives us benefits and causes no damage, except to the local bad bug population. They are self-sustaining and require no maintenance, no sacks or cans of pet food, no boxes to clean out, no trips to the vet, no shots or licenses and no nasty messes on your lawn or the neighbor's yard. What better pet could you ask for?

**And, what's in your backyard?**