

Walking Stick Insects by Sally Cureton

Stick Insects!

Several times in the past month, there has been an insect known as a Walking Stick on one of my outside doors. Considering that there are more than 3000 known varieties of this insect in the world, perhaps this is not particularly notable, but these are the first I've seen here. Generally these creatures will spend their days hanging motionless from leaves and branches. Then, since they are herbivores, the nighttime is spent feeding on these same leaves and twigs. Walking Sticks have amazing powers of adaptation and can have a gray, green or brown coloration. They have also been known to have color patterns that match moss, lichens, bark or leaves. This camouflage is so effective that frequently they are completely undetected by birds or other predators. They will even sway to imitate wind on vegetation. If disturbed, they will just drop to the ground like a dead twig.

Generally, Walking Sticks average a couple of inches in length, but one species which lives in Borneo has been recorded at 21 inches long. They have suckers and claws on their feet which allow them to walk straight up a vertical surface or upside down. This wingless insect also has the unique capacity for partial regeneration. If a leg comes off or is damaged it can grow back after several molts. Molting, or shedding its skin, enables it to grow at a rapid pace. Generally they will become adults in about 6 months and will live in the wild for another six months. Walking Sticks have been known to live in captivity for up to three years. They belong to the order Phasmatidae comes from the Greek word meaning "apparition" referring to the effect of their effective camouflage.

Another unique aspect to this insect is its reproductive life. Most Stick insects reproduce non-sexually. The females will average a few hundred eggs in their lifetimes. Although some make use of male-female mating to create fertilized eggs, many others are born with already fertilized eggs. The result is that the young are identical to the female. The best known Walking Stick is the 4 inch long Indian Stick which reproduces in the non-sexual manner. One source stated that males of this species were unrecorded; another stated that one in one thousand was a male. With the other Walking Stick species that do mate, the females will attract a mate by emitting a pheromone. She then lays her eggs on the forest floor where they can remain for up to three years before hatching. They are protected from predators by their seed like appearance and a hard shell. So in both the adult and the egg form, these are frequently difficult insects to discern. Maybe that's why even humans have trouble seeing them.

