

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Time
by Sanjay Sondhi

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The Praying Mantis

Nature's small wonders never cease to amaze me. Recently, sitting in my garden, I observed some movement on a small plant near me. I looked closely, and to my delight saw a small green insect which had its front legs neatly folded as though in prayer!

I was watching an insect called the Praying Mantis. The Praying Mantis is very appropriately named, because the insect sits with its large front legs folded, as though it is praying. As far as prayers go, I believe that the Praying Mantis does pray, but for its own good health, because it devours a whole range of insects, sometime twice its own size! So its prayers are obviously not meant for the other insects around it!



The Praying Mantis lies patiently in wait on its perch, almost motionless. The only movement is that of its head with its large eyes. As soon as its prospective victim comes close enough, it swiftly launches itself and grabs its live food in its deadly front legs. It proceeds to devour its food in its large jaws, even as the victim struggles in its deadly, but inescapable front legs. The front legs of the Mantis have numerous prominent jagged spines which enables it easily hold on to the struggling prey. I have seen the Mantis eat insects varying from grasshoppers, to bugs to even butterflies

which are sometime twice as large as the mantis! On occasion, Praying Mantids(plural) are even known to catch small lizards and even birds.

Given that it is such a ferocious predator the Praying Mantis not only needs to pray, but also conceal itself really well. Hence, mantids come in different shapes and colors-one of the mantids looks like a stick, others called Bark Mantids looks like the bark on a tree, all disguises meant to conceal itself from its prospective victims. The Praying Mantis I was watching in my garden was green and brown matching the color of the plant it was sitting on, ensuring it was well camouflaged. Recently, during a trip to the forests in the Landsdowne area, I observed a Praying Mantis that was sitting on a *Lantana* plant, and its color perfectly matched the pink color of the *Lantana* flowers!

The life cycle of the Praying Mantis is a marvel. The female Praying Mantis displays its honeymoon hunger by eating the male even as it mates and on occasion, the female is known to eat the male, even before copulation is complete! The female mantid constructs an egg case which is called “*ootheca*”. The ootheca is made from a gummy like substance that the female secretes. and it hardens. The ootheca looks like a hardened ball of cotton with grooves on its surface and is normally attached to a plant. Inside the ootheca are the eggs of the mantid. When the eggs hatch, numerous, really tiny and cute looking mantids emerge, ready to eat from the word go!

When I looked closely at the Praying Mantis in our garden, I saw spots of yellow pollen on the insects body, and I realized that the mantis by assisting in pollination, does its own bit in keeping the web of life moving.

Praying Mantids are easy to observe, and can be even seen in your home garden. They are harmless to humans, and help keep insect pests in your garden under control. So the next time you see a Praying Mantis in your garden, observe its folded legs and don't forget to return the insects *namaste!*

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

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