

Care guide

Living Twig, *Austrocarausius mercurius*



These thin phasmids are remarkably like twigs. Their body shape, colour and small bumps on their surface all help to make this species to blend in to their surroundings. If disturbed they will let go of the branch they are clinging to and fall to the forest floor. They will remain motionless for long periods of time and even remain still with their body rigid just like a twig if handled.

Both sexes of this species are wingless, and are quite similar to one another until they mature. The females (picture above) grow larger and thicker than the males. Adult males have less textured bodies which are greenish in colouration.

Like other phasmids, they have a very interesting reproductive cycle, beginning with the eggs being tossed individually by females from the trees down to the rainforest floor. The tiny eggs look very much like plant seeds and may be collected by ants (along with those of other stick insect species). If collected by ants, the eggs are stored below ground in the ant nest. This is beneficial to the eggs as it offers a degree of protection from predators.

Whether it hatches within the rainforest leaf litter or underground in an ant chamber, the tiny stick insect (nymph) must make its way up through the maze of obstacles up into a nearby tree. At this point in life the nymphs have a very strong instinct to climb upwards, which ensures that they head in the right direction.

Once in a tree the nymph begins to feed on leaves and grows by shedding its outer skeleton (exoskeleton). This process is called ecdysis or moulting. To moult successfully the insect needs to hang uninterrupted beneath a leaf or branch. This process usually takes 10 – 20 minutes to complete.

An amazing fact about many stick insects is that they are parthenogenetic. This means that females don't need to be mated to reproduce. So if you only have a single female, she can still produce young - replicas of herself.

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Food: Various species of gum (*Eucalyptus spp.*), Cadagi (*Corymbia torreliana*), Guava (*Psidium spp.*), and Scrub Cherry (*Syzygium australe*). Ensure fresh, healthy leaves are always available to your insect. Don't let the leaves dry out before you change them. The leaves can be put into a jar of water to keep them fresh for as long as possible. Make sure the jar has a lid or covering with holes in it to stop the young stick insects from falling in and drowning. *Offering two or three species of food plant when you first get your stick insects is a good way finding one that they like.

Water: Mist-spray the leaves around your insect once a day – it will drink the droplets if thirsty.

Enclosure: The enclosure needs to be large enough to allow your stick insect to shed its exoskeleton properly. An enclosure should be higher than it is wide, as stick insects like to climb upwards. Minimum size requirements are 35cm high x 30cm wide x 30cm deep. Place the enclosure in a spot where it gets a bit of daylight each day, but be careful it doesn't over heat in direct sunlight. Make sure there is plenty of ventilation in your enclosure.

Life span: Around a year.

This species will do best at 22 – 26° C, but will tolerate 10 – 20° C and have a slower growth rate.

Handling: They should be picked up gently, by coaxing them onto your hand. They always prefer to climb up, so use this to your advantage when picking them up and putting them back onto the leaves. They do have small hooks on their feet that they use to hang on with – these may tickle a little. Larger specimens may be picked up gently using the thumb and index finger to grip them mid-body. This is particularly useful if a Living Twig drops defensively and plays dead (mimics a twig).

Reproduction: Adult males will mate with adult females all year round. A female may also lay eggs even when she hasn't been mated. Once the female starts to lay eggs, they can be collected from the bottom of the enclosure and stored in a small container. Eggs should be incubated in a moist medium and will begin to hatch after a few months at 22- 25 degrees. Incubation times will be prolonged at lower temperatures. The hatchlings should be fed on soft young leaves, and can be housed in the same enclosure as the adults.

Common issues: This species will readily drop from foliage when disturbed – be aware of this when changing to your insects browse to prevent losing them.

NOTE: These animals are captive bred, and should not be released into the wild.

For more information contact Minibeast Wildlife at info@minibeastwildlife.com.au