

## Care guide

Antlion, *Myrmeleon* sp.



Antlions are predatory insects that belong to the family Myrmeleontidae. They are found Australia-wide in sandy habitats, with many species present. They are best known in their larval form (pictured above), which is a predator of ants and other small invertebrates. Adult antlions are fully winged and superficially resemble dragonflies and damselflies, however they are not related to these insects. Their true relatives are the lacewings, which share the lace-like wing structure.

The pits of antlions are seen far more often than the insects themselves. Each larva digs a conical pit in sandy ground as a trap for crawling insects. The larva waits buried in the sand at the bottom of the pit until a small invertebrates stumbles in. As the creature tries to escape, the antlion flicks a barrage of sand grains up into the air using its head and mandibles. The loose sand tumbles down the steep sides of the pit and creates a highly unstable surface. More often than not, the small animal will lose its footing and tumble to the bottom giving the antlion a chance to seize it with its huge mandibles.

Antlions feed by grasping their prey with their hollow sickle-shaped mandibles and injecting powerful saliva. The internal tissues of the prey are turned to liquid and then sucked out by the antlion. Prey commonly consists of ants, but also a variety of other crawling invertebrates including spiders. Once finished with their prey, they flick the dry carcass out of the pit.

Antlions begin as tiny eggs laid within the sand. They hatch into small (1<sup>st</sup> instar) larvae. After feeding for some time each larva will moult into the next stage and resume feeding. The larvae go through three instars before pupating. This phase can take 2-3 years depending on food availability. They create a cocoon within the sand to undergo metamorphosis. The cocoon is round and covered in sand grains and very hard to see. Adult antlions have a relatively short life-span.

# Care guide

## Antlion (larva), *Myrmeleon* sp.

**Food:** Live invertebrates; small black ants, juvenile crickets, wingless drosophila flies and tiny spiders. Feeding your antlion once per day is more than sufficient. They may feed several times within a day, but are also capable of going for a week or more without food.

**Water:** Ant lions required very little water – they get most of it from their food. Mist spray lightly around your antlion's pit once every two weeks. Ensure the sand remains relatively dry, otherwise their pit-trap will not function.

**Enclosure:** A small plastic terrarium, small fish tank or even a lunch-box sized plastic container would be suitable. Use a fine dry sand as the substrate. The sand should be at least 30mm deep. Antlion larvae cannot climb so a lid is not required to keep them in, however, they will flick sand out of a shallow container.

**Temperature:** 15 – 28. Room temperatures suit this species well.

**Life span:** 2-3 years.

**Handling:** If you have to move your antlion, gently scoop it up using a teaspoon. It can be safely handled in your palm, but avoid trying to pick it up with your finger tips; too much pressure could harm it.

**Common issues:** If the sand in your enclosure becomes too damp your antlion will not be able to construct and maintain a hunting pit. To avoid this make sure that at least half the sand in the enclosure is dry at all times.

Antlions often 'play dead'. If you dig up your antlion and it does not move it may well be doing this. Generally live antlions will not want to be exposed for more than a few minutes, so will begin to shunt backwards in a jerky motion attempting to bury themselves.

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