

Care guide

Australian Leaf Insect, *Phyllium monteithi*



Australian Leaf insects are Australia's only true leaf insects. As their name suggests, their body closely resembles a leaf complete with venations. The adults grow to around 85mm long, with the body of the adult female being much wider than the male. Both adult males and adult females have full length wings, but only the male is capable of flight.

They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, beginning with the eggs being tossed individually by females from the trees down to the forest floor. A single female may lay hundreds of eggs in a lifetime. The eggs are brown and bark-like in appearance. They incubate in the leaf litter and hatch around 4 months after being laid.

After hatching, the baby leaf insects (nymphs) must make their way into a tree. The nymphs are red/black when they hatch, then change to green after a few days as they start to feed. They use their appearance to blend into the small leaf growth at the tips of branches.

Once in a tree they begin to feed on leaves and grow by shedding their 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 can take 10mins to half an hour.

An amazing fact about many phasmids 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: Brush Cherry (*Syzygium australe*) seems to be the best and easiest captive diet for this species. This plant is readily available from nurseries throughout Australia. They will eat several other plant species including Cape Ironwood (*Gossia floribunda*), Guava (*Psidium* spp.) and some *Eucalyptus* spp.. Ensure fresh, healthy leaves are always available to your insect. Don't let the leaves dry out or wilt 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.

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

Enclosure: The enclosure needs to be large enough to allow your leaf insect to shed its exoskeleton properly. A number of individuals can be housed together as long as each insect has sufficient space to hang and feed without disturbing others. An enclosure should be higher than it is wide, as leaf insects like to climb upwards. 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.

Temperature: The safe range is 22 – 28° C, but will tolerate periods of cooler temperatures (overnight lows) of 12°C as long as the temperatures rises back into the safe range during the day.

Life span: 8 – 15 months.

Handling: They may be picked up gently, by coaxing them onto your hand. Young nymphs in particular can be nervous and may drop unexpectedly to the ground. They always prefer to climb up, so use this to your advantage when picking them up and putting them back onto the leaves. Never pull or use force to remove them from a leaf or surface inside your enclosure.

Reproduction: Adult males will mate with adult females all year round. Females 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 within moist coco-peat. Eggs may begin hatching after 4 months incubation at ~23°C. Cooler temperatures may prolong incubation and external seasonal factors may also have an impact despite incubation temperatures. The hatchlings need to be fed on soft young leaves, and can be housed in the same enclosure as the adults.

Common issues: Young nymphs may leave the food plant and sit on the ceiling of the enclosure (unable to find their food). Ensuring the plant does not touch the walls or ceiling of the enclosure will solve this issue.

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