CARE GUIDE

MINIBEAST WILDLIFE

AUSTRALIAN LEAF INSECT

Walaphyllium monteithi

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Walaphyllium monteithi

PROFILE

Australian Leaf insects are one of only two species of true leaf insects found in Australia. 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.

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.), Golden Penda (Xanthostemon chrysanthus) and may nibble on 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 should 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. The leaves should touch the top and sides of the enclosure. Food plant should be changed over at least once a week.

WATER

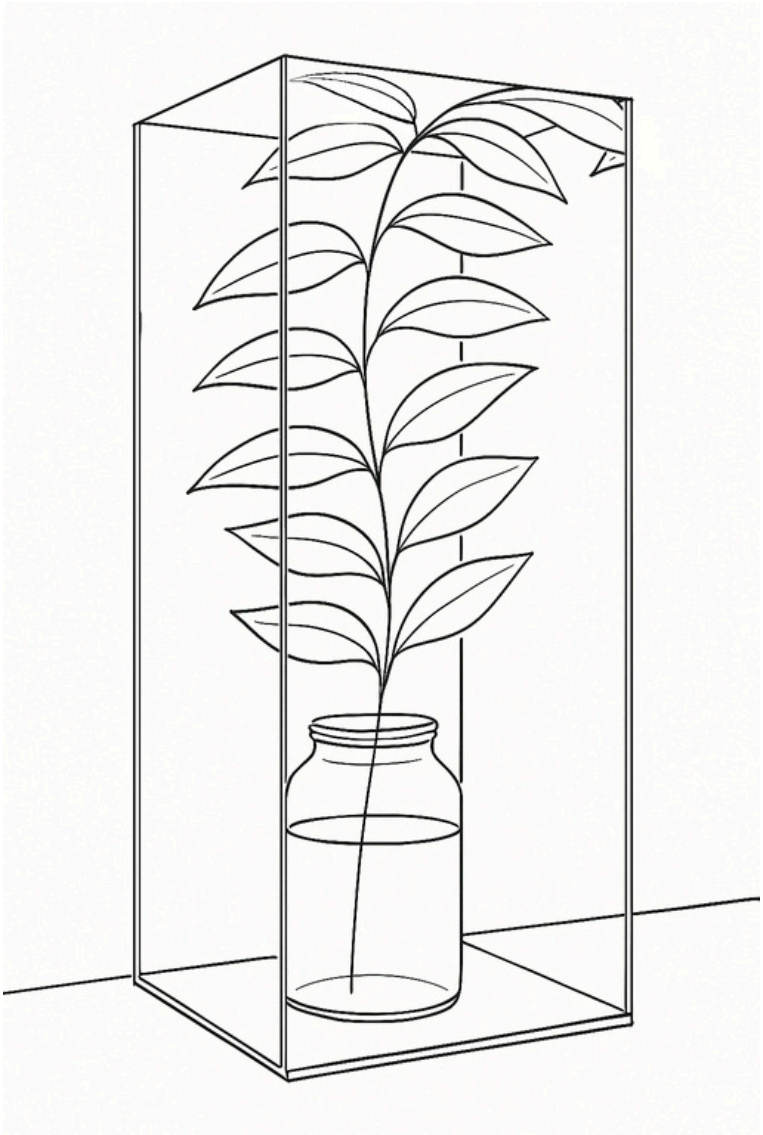
Mist-spray the leaves around your insect once a day – it will drink the droplets.

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. An enclosure at least 30cm H x 30cm W x 30cm D is recommended. Place the enclosure in a spot where it gets a bit of daylight each day, but be careful it doesn't overheat in direct sunlight. Make sure there is plenty of ventilation in your enclosure.

SUBSTRATE

Not required, but it can help with clean up to put some paper down on the bottom of the enclosure to catch the frass (poo) and leaf material that falls to the ground.



The branch of leaves should be in a jar of water and should reach the top and sides of the enclosure. Multiple branches can be used.

CLEANING AND MAINTENANCE

Remove frass (poo) and fallen leaf material from the bottom of the enclosure once a week. This can be done when the food plant is changed over. If you have adult females in the enclosure, collect any eggs present on the enclosure floor.

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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.

COMMON ISSUES

Young nymphs may leave the food plant and sit on the ceiling of the enclosure (unable to find their food). Ensuring the food plant touches the walls and ceiling of the enclosure will solve this issue.

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.

EGG INCUBATION

The adult female will lay start laying eggs around a month after she moults to maturity. She will flick these onto the floor of the enclosure, and may lay several a day. Her eggs can hatch even if she has not mated with a male. If her eggs are not fertilised, the offspring will all be female. If she has mated with a male, the offspring will be male and female. The eggs will take at least three months to hatch after they were laid, but may take longer. Put the eggs in a ventilated container (insect mesh is perfect). After around three months, put the eggs in some moist coco-peat, and keep the coco-peat damp. Once the eggs start to hatch, the hatchling stick insects will feed on soft foliage.

8 – 15 months life span

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

60-80%

Hatchling of the Australian Leaf insect

Egg of the Australian Leaf insect

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