CARE GUIDE

MINIBEAST WILDLIFE

SPINY LEAF INSECT

Extatosoma tiaratum

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PROFILE

Spiny Leaf Insects are stick insects – also known as phasmids. Adult Spiny Leaf Insects are more like dead leaves than sticks however, and are very hard to spot in the wild as they hang motionless from foliage. They are leaf-eaters like other phasmids, and are found in the north east of Australia, where they feed on a variety of plants types.

They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, beginning with the eggs being tossed individually by females from the trees down to the forest floor. The eggs look very much like plant seeds and are often collected by ants and stored below ground in their nests which protects the egg from predators.

After hatching, the baby leaf insects (nymphs) must make their way to the surface and into a tree. Nymphs mimic the appearance of an ant at this stage of its life – this doesn't fool ants, but does fool other animals such as birds which don't like eating ants.

Once in a tree it begins to feed on leaves and grows by shedding its outer skeleton (exoskeleton). This process is called ecdysis or moulting. Males will do this five times, and females six times to reach maturity. To moult successfully the insect needs to hang uninterrupted beneath a leaf or branch. This can take 10mins to half an hour. Mature males develop wings and hold their abdomens straight. Females retain the curled up posture and have spines along their backs.

An amazing fact about many phasmids (including Spiny Leaf 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.

FOOD

Fresh healthy gum leaves – ensure fresh leaves are always available for your insect. Spiny leaf insects may also feed on Rose leaves, some Acacia (wattle) leaves, Tree Lucerne, Cadagi and Guava. Don't let the leaves dry out before you change them. The leaves (stems) 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. Offering two or three species of food plant when you first get your stick insects is a good way of finding one that they like. 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 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 30cm 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 overheat in direct sunlight. Make sure there is plenty of ventilation in your enclosure.

COMMON ISSUES

Sometimes stick insects will not shed their exoskeleton properly. This may be because there isn't enough room in the enclosure for them to do so, or that their environment is too dry and their new exoskeleton hardens before they can free themselves from the old one. They can also lose limbs through the moulting process if they aren't hanging correctly whilst moulting. They can regrow lost limbs at their next moult, but need at least two moults to regrow a limb to a usable size

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.

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.

TEMPERATURE

This species will do best at 22 – 26° C, but will tolerate 18 – 20° C and have a slower growth rate.

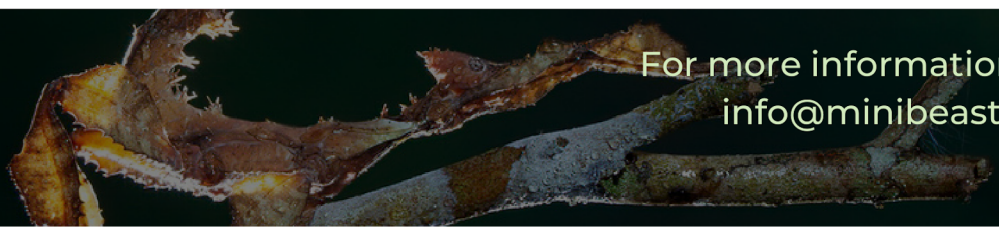
SUBSTRATE

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.

12-18 months life span

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

60-80%



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