

# Praying for the praying Mantis

-Neeraj Jain

When we think of praying mantis, we think of a large green ferocious looking insect, sitting immobile on a plant waiting for a prey. Therefore, when I noticed this long thin brown insect in a room of my institute, I thought it must be a stick insect, which had wandered in through the open window. My institute was built in a remote area on the foothills of the Aravali range. Surrounded by forest, we had all sorts of creepy-crawlies invading our building, particularly in the rainy season. (The reality is that we had invaded their territory, and they had more than enough reasons to be angry with us.)

Going close to the insect, I noticed the praying mantis like posture of the front legs, which had those tell-tale spines. Driven by curiosity, I caught the insect and brought it home in a box. At home I put it in an unused, small fish tank, which I covered with a piece of window mesh. Both Manas and Kartik, my seven and three years old sons were excited to have a pet praying mantis. They went downstairs and brought a few twigs and some grass from the garden for the praying mantis to sit on, and make it feel at home. After it climbed up on the twig, it was not easy to tell the twig and the praying mantis apart. It was a perfect camouflage.

Now we had to think about keeping it alive. I had no clue what to feed to this kind of praying mantis. I started a search on the Internet, a great tool to find all kinds of information, if we learn how to search effectively, and how to tell apart more authentic information from the unreliable one. Few minutes of search brought me to pictures of similar looking preying mantis. In fact, I was amazed to discover that there is such a wide variety of praying mantis, evolved to blend in different backgrounds. Some were like dried leaves, some were like flowers, and lot many like twigs. To know which praying mantis we had, I took help from Dr Hemant Ghate. Dr Ghate, a zoologist who lives in Pune, and is an expert on praying mantis. I sent him a picture of our mantis, and he immediately replied that it was *Toxoderopsis*, most likely *T. taurus*.

Only information we could find on Internet was that all praying mantises like to eat insects, larvae or other small animals. There was very little information on what our preying mantis would eat. We caught a few ants, a grasshopper and other insects, and put them in the fish tank, but we did not see it catch or eat anything. Children were getting worried and praying for it to live. We sprinkled some water on the walls of the tank for it to drink, and even put some water in small, very shallow container. But after about a week we found that it lying dead at the bottom. We felt very sad, blaming ourselves that because we could not give it appropriate food. Then we noticed an egg case. The egg case, called ootheca, was stuck to one of the twigs that we had placed in the tank. So perhaps this female preying mantis had lived its life span and was anyway about to die after laying its eggs. This was end of August, just before winters, when preying mantis lay their eggs and die at the end of their life cycle.

We did not think about the fish tank any longer, although we did not disturb it because we had no plans to do anything with it for now. After about three weeks,

while passing by the fish tank, I noticed a small little insect swaying on the twig. We had a baby mantis!

Preying mantis are those kind of insects, whose babies, when they come out of the eggs look just like the adults. They eat, molt and grow bigger. This life cycle of insects is different from those of flies, where a larva emerges from the egg, eats and grows, and becomes a pupa. From pupa a fully-grown adult fly comes out.

We started searching all over the tank, and discovered two more baby praying mantises. We do not know how many eggs actually hatched. It would have been easy for the babies to escape because the mesh covering the tank was not tight enough to prevent such tiny babies from escaping. Or may be these babies, which are called nymphs, ate all other babies. Praying mantises will eat their brothers and sisters if there is no food or if there is overcrowding. Normally, these babies would have hatched in spring after another 5-6 months, but due to warm temperature in the room, they hatched just three weeks after the eggs were laid.

Sadly, after few days even the remaining babies disappeared. But it was a wonderful experience for Manas and Kartik to learn about the fascinating world of insects. We still often talk about our preying mantises and look at their pictures.