



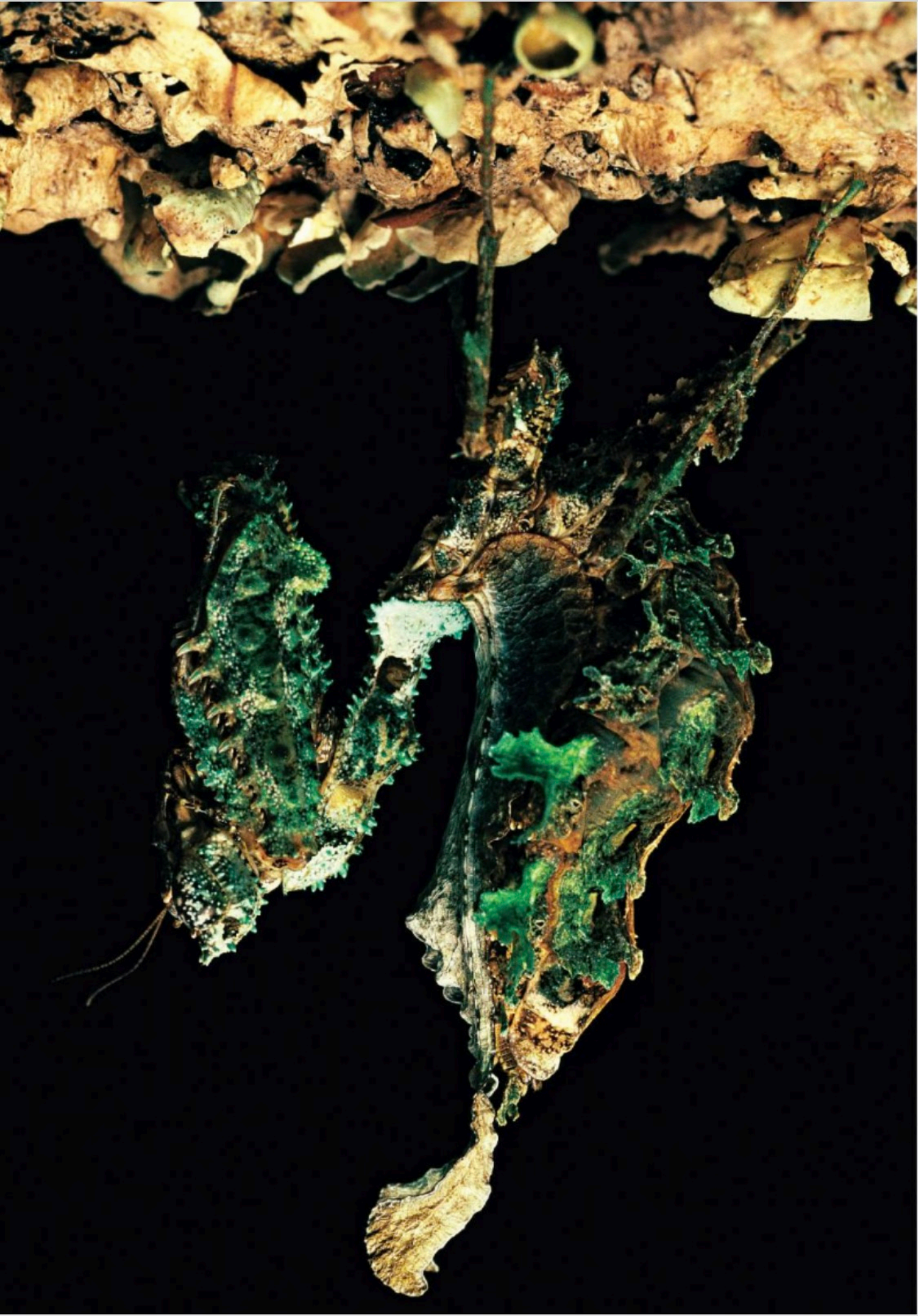
mantids

armed and dangerous

text and photographs by mark w. moffett

She seems almost human, this mantid I found in West Africa. She has such alert eyes, and her head tilts to follow me. But she is pure menace to any prey that happens to wander within range of those huge forelegs, which can snap shut like bear traps. Most of the roughly 1,800 species of mantids—often called praying mantises—spend their time sitting and waiting, seemingly at prayer. In fact, I learned as I pursued them across four continents, they are among the insect world's craftiest hunters.


SPHODROMANTIS LINEOLA 3.5 IN



brilliant disguise

Camouflage is a mantid art form, helping them hunt prey and hide from predators. An Ecuadorian mantid (left) matches the color and texture of lichen on the twig from which it hangs; its arms are folded under its head, at left, but its antennae are a giveaway. A juvenile Burmese flower mantid (above) blends in with a plant's stamens in Myanmar. Mantids can also mimic leaves, grass, twigs, stones, even ants.

PSEUDACANTHOPS SP., 1.5 IN (LEFT); CREOBROTHER SP. NYMPH, 1.5 IN

A photograph of a juvenile flower mantid (Theopropus sp.) on a large, green fern leaf in a rainforest. The mantid is light green with yellowish-orange markings and is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the frame. The background is a dense, dark green forest with many ferns and other foliage. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the mantid and the leaf.

stepping out

Just weeks old, a juvenile flower mantid tiptoes through a Myanmar rain forest, perhaps searching for a spot to ambush insects. Mantid females lay a foamy mass of tens to hundreds of eggs, which hatch after a few weeks. The wingless nymphs that emerge often fall victim to spiders and other predators. Those that survive grow into adults, usually winged, that range from an inch long in a California species to seven inches in an African giant.

THEOPROPUS SP. NYMPH, 1.5 IN


swift and precise, a mantid can dismember an animal larger than itself.



predator and prey

In Gabon a mantid becomes a lizard's lunch (above). But another mantid, also from Gabon, turns the tables by dining on a different lizard, a gecko (left). Mantid fare includes insects, frogs, birds, turtles, and, famously, each other: Females may devour males during mating. Sexual cannibalism has received a lot of attention but may not be common in the wild. It has almost always been observed in captivity, where males cannot escape.

PLISTOSPILOTA SP., 4 IN (LEFT); MIOMANTIS SP., 3 IN



leaf look-alike

This Malaysian mantid aims to fool enemies and prey alike. Called a dead-leaf mantid, its body perfectly imitates withered foliage, though its head is recognizable. Mantids have plenty of reasons to hide. Birds, snakes, spiders, toads, and rodents all feast on mantids lurking in foliage and on the forest floor. At night, bats snap up flying mantids.

DEROPLATYS TRUNCATA, 3.5 IN



masters of adaptation, mantids need little more than a supply of prey and a spell of warm weather.

FIND OUT what mantids and martial arts have in common, learn about mantid lore, and visit an online photo gallery at ngm.com/0601.



at home, rain or shine

A moss-patterned mantid scurries over the rain forest floor in Suriname (left). Half a world away, a mantid watches an Arizona sunset from a creosote bush in the Sonoran Desert (above). Both are juveniles, with developing wing buds. Mantids are found in many habitats and on every continent except Antarctica. They have fascinated humans for thousands of years, including the ancient Greeks, who were the first to use the term mantis, meaning “prophet.” □

LITURGUSA SP. NYMPH, 2 IN (LEFT); STAGMOMANTIS LIMBATA NYMPH, 2 IN