



Stick Figures

Aptly named, walkingsticks move extremely slowly, since you don't need a lot of speed to catch a leaf.

Let's talk insects for a change, or *phasmatodea*, commonly known as walkingsticks. One of my friends mentioned that she had only run across them once or twice. I see them a few times a year, normally coupled, and some years not at all. But they are masters of disguise. They look like - well - sticks. And they walk but they don't run; in fact they are award-winning couch potatoes, or as the case may be,

branch and leaf sitters. They move excruciatingly slowly since you don't need a lot of speed to catch a leaf. White oak, black cherry, black locust, and walnut are their preferred diet, although the young are often found on lower-lying perennials. Moving so slowly is a good strategy if you can't crank up real speed, because it doesn't attract attention. Walkingsticks are on a lot of creatures' menus, including primates, bats, rodents, spiders, reptiles, and birds.

When asked by a friend what I knew about them, I said that once I did a presentation on unusual animal courtship for Valentine's Day, and they were featured because of the duration of their hooking up which lasts up to 50+ days! If you feel exhausted or envious, fear not; like deer they are actually *mate guarding* and not actively having relations for that length of time. In fact, I had to wonder who has observed them for that long. I guess my curiosity is fulfilled more quickly than some other people's.

In any event *mate guarding* is a way of insuring your genes are in the pool and no one else is

invited to the swim meet, if you get my point. And I assured my friend that this fidelity was a good thing. She agreed.

When the female lays her eggs they are randomly scattered. This is another good strategy, since if you lay all your eggs in one basket, finding them all is like one-stop-shopping to a predator. A number of sources note that the eggs are scattered on the forest floor, while others state that they are laid on host plants (plants that provide food for juveniles/nymphs).

They eat leaves in a fashion known as "skeletonizing," meaning the veins are left, causing a skeleton-like appearance. Evidently there can be significant outbreaks of the species that have caused reductions in oak forests in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas and Missouri (Stephen, et. al., 2001-*Integrated Pest Management Review*).

Walkingsticks can regenerate limbs if attacked. They shed their skin or molt about five times as their size increases. Evidently smaller ones hang around closer to the ground than their adult

counterparts, who stay higher up in trees in August and September. Thus they are seldom seen.

The U of Michigan, Museum of Zoology hosts a super website called Animal Diversity Web. They report that walkingsticks' lifecycle has three stages: eggs, nymphs, and adult. This cycle is synchronized with host plants' phases. In our region these insects would tend to be biannual, with a new generation every two years, while more southern states would have a generation each year.

Douglas Tallamy, in his book *Bringing Nature Home*, shares some interesting facts. The *phasm* in walkingsticks' Latin name means *phantom*. The way they blend into their background is spectral; first you see them and then you don't. He further relates that 33 species live north of Mexico. Some tropical species are 12 inches, but in the Eastern US the most common encounter is with *Diaperomera femorata*; females grow to about 4 inches and males to 3. Although some walkingsticks have wings these do not, while in some species wings are on one sex and not the

other. Walkingsticks have three pairs of legs. Females are usually greenish brown and males are brown.

Various species of walkingsticks are found on every continent but Antarctica. For more information on these and other cool creatures, the University of Michigan, Museum of Zoology's Animal Diversity Web is excellent. The very complete list of references will enable you to delve even deeper into each species.