

# THE AMERICAN BIOLOGY TEACHER



## About Our Cover

Striking features and behaviors make the praying mantis one of the most fascinating and recognizable insects in our world. Its highly mobile head and large eyes are perched on a flexible neck whose movement give the eerie impression that they are maintaining direct eye contact with us. This look is rare among insects. Combine its penetrating stare and large, spiny forelegs with a formidable reputation as a ferocious predator, and it's no wonder that everyone knows a praying mantis when they see one. They seem to have personality!

Over 2000 species of praying mantises occur worldwide and derive their common name from robust forelegs held high in their unusual upright posture. These bent forelegs remind us of hands folded in prayer, but are actually lethal weapons for ambushing small invertebrates. A captured prey is held fast by spiny ridges on the mantis' gripping forelegs and is usually devoured head-first while the prey is alive and struggling.

The European mantis shown here (*Mantis religiosa*) was introduced in 1899 to North America from southern Europe. They are beneficial predators often sold commercially as egg cases for pest insect control, but they are so cannibalistic and nonsocial that sustainable populations are usually too small to effectively combat pest outbreaks. Nevertheless, they make interesting and easy-to-keep pets. But be careful if you put two of them together, especially a male and female. The smaller male may become dinner!

This mantis was patiently waiting for an unsuspecting pollinator to land on this thistle flower (*Cirsium* sp.) and provide lunch. This photo was taken along the coast of Oregon by Dr. Darrell Vodopich, [Biologymaging.com](http://Biologymaging.com), using a Canon SX280, 4.0-90-mm lens, 1/640 sec., and ISO 80.

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