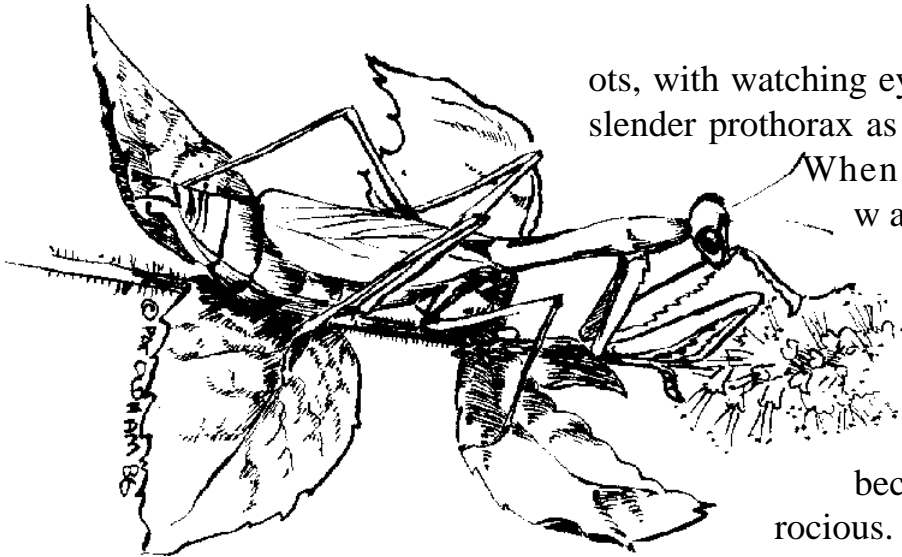




# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Praying mantis



In the wild, hunters pursue food in many ways. A mountain lion may kill a mule deer, eat part of it, and cover the remainder with earth as it sets aside a future meal. A coyote is an opportunist and will eat fresh or tainted meat. A turkey vulture feeds on carrion.

These small but fearsome hunters may live in your backyard. The praying mantis waits motionless on the stalk of a plant, its forelegs raised as if it were praying. Its stick-like torso, brown or green, blends with grasses and branches. This slender insect, two to three inches long, looks delicate.

The mantis' small head piv-

ots, with watching eyes, on a slender prothorax as it waits.

When prey wanders within its range, the mantis becomes ferocious. Its forelegs grab the target with lightning speed. The struggling prey is held with spines on the mantis' forelegs and tiny teeth in its mouth.

The praying mantis then consumes its meal alive. It starts by chewing the victim's head and continues down the body, after removing and discarding the wings. You can observe pieces of the meal as they move through the translucent body of the hunter.

The prey list is primarily insects but may include small lizards. Small mantises cavalierly eat their own brothers and sisters, and female mantises may eat males — sometimes while mating.

A female mantis lays eggs in a mass on plant stems or on walls in the autumn. The mass hardens into an egg case (ootheca) with up to 200 eggs. These hatch in the spring.

Some people collect praying mantis egg cases in the fall and place them in their gardens at home. Young mantises feed all summer on insects that might plague a garden. Although they eat both pests and helpful insects, such as ladybugs, praying mantises are considered beneficial insects.

The praying mantis found in New Mexico is native to the Southwest. Most mantises in the world are tropical. Larger mantises in the eastern United States were introduced from China.

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