

Stick Insects As Pets

As a child I remember being fascinated by the collection of stick insects and spiders kept by my schools science department. I would volunteer each summer to take them home, and care for them during the holiday period.

There are nearly 3,000 species belonging to the order Phasmatodea coming in a myriad of shapes and sizes. They are plant eaters feeding on vegetation and are some of the most popular insect pets. The most common species kept in the UK is probably the Indian Stick Insect (*Carausius morosus*).

Housing

Some owners successfully keep mixed exhibits, with multiple stick insect species that share similar care requirements. My general advice though (particularly to the less experienced) is to keep single species in each terrarium so specific temperature and humidity requirements can be more easily met. It is important not to keep overpopulated, overcrowded cages; which can lead to stress, molting problems, food competition leading to retarded growth and occasionally injuries from cage mates. Overcrowding is one of the principle causes of lost limbs which is common affliction suffered in poorly managed collections.

The common Indian Stick insect is particularly popular as it thrives at room temperature - 17-21°C being ideal. Many species are tropical or semi-tropical, requiring additional heating to bring their environment up to around 25°C. Many options are available to control the temperature. Heating the entire room can be best for large collections whereas heat mats (thermostatically controlled) or over head light bulbs can work well to heat individual terrariums. Excessive heat should be avoided which can occur if an enclosure is placed in full sunlight. Use of a max/min thermometer allows you to monitor the temperatures.

To shed their skins most stick insects hang down from branches. This means their cage must be sufficiently high - 3x adult length is a minimum rule for cage height. Easy access

with a full front opening makes changing food material (often prickly bramble) much easier than a top opening cage. It is important that old food is closely examined to make sure that no inhabitants are accidentally dislodged.

Humidity requirements vary between the stick insect species – it is important to fully research the species you are keeping to ensure you know its husbandry requirements. Many care sheets on the Internet are from American authors in regions with a very different climate to the UK, it is best to seek husbandry advice from people keeping the species in the same climate as you. Humidity is affected by ambient temperature, misting, ventilation and air-flow. Some species with lower humidity requirements (such as Indian Stick insects) are suitable to be kept in mesh terrariums with lots of ventilation whereas others (such as the beautiful *Epidaurus nolitangere*) need higher humidity and less ventilation making a glass or plastic terrarium ideal. Humidity can be increased by using dampened substrate or misting. Damp kitchen towel on the floor of the terrarium can be very useful at raising humidity and can be changed daily for optimum hygiene.

Feeding

Bramble leaves and related species of the genus *Rubus* are the staple diet of many commonly kept Stick Insects. It is tempting to use just one food source for simplicity however I recommend feeding a varied diet. Many insects such as the Indian Giant Spiny stick insect (*Extatosoma tiaratum*), the Thorn Legged stick insect (*Eurycantha calcarata*), the Small Spiny stick insect (*Aretaon asperrimus*) and the Jungle Nymph (*Heteropteryx dilatata*) will also enjoy plants like Oak (*Quercus* sp.) and Hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*). Some species, such as the Peruvian Fern Stick insect (*Oreophoetes peruana*, *O. topoense* etc), feed on bracken and other ferns. Food should always be available and fresh. Pesticides on plants are one of the biggest killers and all food should be from pesticide free plants. Garden centre plants are commonly treated with pesticides. Plants adjacent to arable farmland can often be contaminated with sprays. Vehicle pollutants affect plants by roads. Plants should be washed before being placed in the

terrarium. Rainwater is preferable to tap water, which contains unwanted chemicals.

Handling

If you wish to handle your stick insects it is best to select hardy species that can tolerate delicate handling. Indian stick insects and Giant Spiny stick insects are two species which are relatively sturdy and tolerate gentle handling. It is important to consider the species being kept before handling. Some species can be uncomfortable to handle due to their thorny limbs or bite. Peruvian Fern Stick insects can excrete a potentially harmful toxin.