

Desert mantis dancing on *magra*

Text and Photographs: **Dharmendra Khandal**

On a sunny March morning, I was following a very special desert bird, Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*, in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan. It was running or walking in spurts, probing and chasing prey. The bird was cautiously probing and digging the ground for insects on the *magra*, i.e., the hard, gravelly, compact ground

surrounded by sand dunes in these parts.

The bird had failed in all its attempts but after some 15 efforts, it succeeded and before I could make out the prey species, it swallowed the prey in a jiffy. I did manage to click some photographs that could be checked on later; but through my eyes, I could only see a few large legs of the insect, as its body was hidden under the bird's beak. I thought it was a large spider or a camel spider (solifuge), but then both of these are active only in the night. The next evening, when high winds were blowing, I noticed a stone-like object 'surfing' over the same *magra*. It was sliding against the direction of the wind, and seemed more like an insect. I moved out of my jeep and went close to check, and was surprised to see the amazing camouflage ability of this insect that looked like a rough pebble. I could not make out what it was till it showed a defensive gesture. It was the same insect that was devoured by the Greater Hoopoe-Lark.

The insect was the Thar Desert Mantis *Eremiophila rotundipennis*. This desert mantis is able to camouflage itself so well in its habitat that it is almost impossible to spot, even when it is right in front of you! When it senses a threat, it raises its humanoid face. The triangular head, with its grasping



The Greater Hoopoe-Lark with its prey



Praying mantids can successfully merge into the background, which is useful for both attack and protection

forelegs, colourful ventral side of its vestigial wings, and threat posture, make it look like a praying mantis. Unlike other mantis (approximately 2,000 species, almost all inhabiting the tropics), desert mantids are unable to fly. The word mantis comes from the Greek *mantikos*, for prophet. Indeed, these insects do look spiritual and mysterious, especially when their forelegs are clasped together as if in prayer.

Desert mantids belong to the genus *Eremiophila* Lefebvre, 1835 (Eremiophilidae), which has 68 species in the world, with only one found in India. These mantids are perfectly adapted to life in desert and semi-desert habitats. They live on the ground, where their long walking legs make very fast running possible. *Eremiophila* feeds on other insects, for which it actively hunts. Desert is characterized by extreme conditions with scarcity of water, low rainfall, high-temperature fluctuations, and dust storms. There is scarce vegetation and animal life. Desert mantids are representatives of such harsh conditions, wherein a primarily arboreal, flying creature has become a ground-dweller.

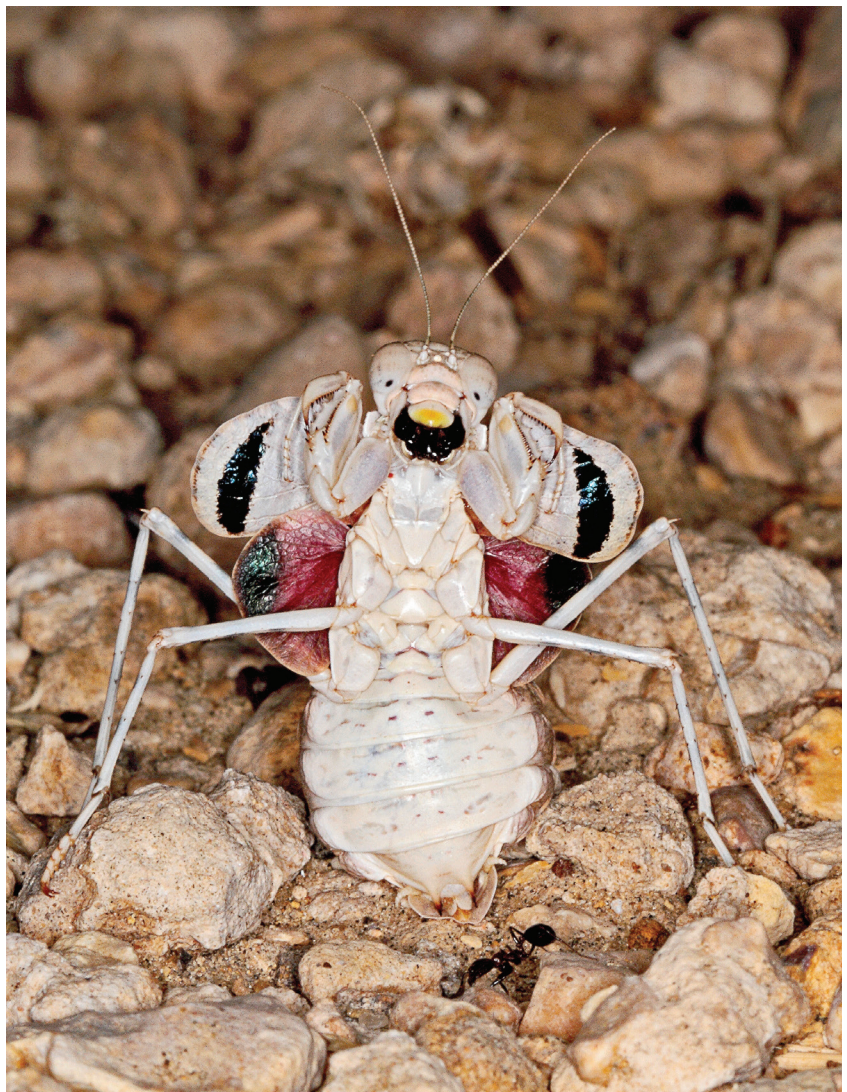
In the Thar, as my observation shows, our Desert Mantis has a great connection with another very interesting bird, the Greater Hoopoe-Lark. So, whenever you see this bird hopping around on *magra* in the deserts of Rajasthan, look out for the desert mantis. ■



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Unlike other mantids, desert mantids lack the ability of flight



These mantids are well-adapted for surviving in desert and semi-desert habitat