



# Phantoms of Forest and Garden

SALLY HIBBARD finds stick insects in the dark.

**D**id that twig just move? If you find yourself asking this question, then you're probably in the company of one of our more unusual insect families.

New Zealand has over 20 species of stick insect, all of which are native. Together with the even more extravagantly shaped leaf insects found in warmer climates, they make up the order Phasmatodea. *Phasma* is Latin for ghost or phantom which is certainly an apt description. The Auckland site in which I regularly observe stick insects is literally teeming with animals in summer; however, it was only after several 'thorough' searches that I located any.

Stick insects are found throughout the country and on many offshore islands. It is likely there are populations on some islands

that we are not yet aware of. It is equally likely that many such populations have been wiped out by introduced predators and loss of habitat before their discovery. Two New Zealand species inadvertently left our shores some years ago after hitching a ride on some plant material and continue to thrive in the temperate climate of southwestern England.

*Above: the common or smooth stick insect. Clitarchus hookeri on pohutukawa.*

*At right is a mated pair (the male is much smaller). They are frequently found like this, the male riding on the female for days at a time.*

