In PNG’s oil palm plantations some of the major pests of the palms are long-horned grasshoppers (actually Tettigoniidae) belonging to the Tribe Sexavae and all called sexava. Sexava are actually made up of a group of ten species in PNG (four that cause damage to oil palm). Sexavae are clumped in to two separate genera, confusingly all given the same common name, although they are all very different, and all bite just as well if handled incorrectly!

Also living in the palm canopy is another long-horned grasshopper which looks superficially very similar to sexava but which, on careful examination is subtly different in that its head is much more elongated, and its front two pairs of legs have long strong raptorial spines on them. Instead of eating vegetation, this grasshopper is actually a carnivore eating other invertebrates, and possibly even small geckos. This insect belongs to the sub-Family Listroscelidinae, and belongs to the Genus Hexacentrus. We do not have a specific name for it yet.

Although it is a smaller insect than sexava, it is a voracious predator and is able to attack, kill and eat larger grasshoppers. The female illustrated in the photograph without any hesitation whatsoever went straight for this last stage (instar) sexava nymph, grabbed it with its front legs, bit into its head, killed it and proceeded to eat most of the hapless creature. Since we have had this female in captivity, she has devoured eleven grasshoppers.

At the moment we do not have a male for her, and when we do find one, we will have to make sure that the cage is big enough for him to run away if he succeeds to mate with her!

Hopefully we will be able to get some eggs, and it will be interesting to see how the young survive, as being carnivorous they will also be cannibalistic. They will have to be reared separately. Carnivory amongst this family of longhorn grasshoppers is well known.

It was interesting and surprising to find that this seemingly rather docile tettigoniid so willingly attacked and killed an insect so much bigger than itself.

Although it is unlikely that these Listroscelidines will have a major impact as a means of controlling sexava, they are clearly a useful addition to our armoury in the overall IPM (Integrated Pest Management) scenario in trying to protect the oil palm; young sexava would only make a snack!

So look out for them among the palms and surrounding vegetation!