

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondh**

Published on 15 October 2010

Crane Flies-Daddy Longlegs

On a recent visit to the reserved forest of Kadua Pani, on the outskirts of Dehradun, I came across an intriguing insect. As we walked in the forest, a funny-looking insect gently glided past my nose. I followed it through the bushes, and watched it descend onto a bush.

Closer observation revealed not one, but two insects, that were mating. The odd looking insects were bright orange in colour with very long legs. The insects were crane flies, belonging to the family Tipulidae. Crane flies superficially look like giant mosquitos, but have a very weak flight and do not bite at all. In fact, many species of crane fly have no mouth parts and do not feed as adults. They live only to mate, and die soon after.



When seated, the crane flies often seem to quiver. Literally, the flies seem to be shaking a leg, as they wobble on their long limbs! In many places, this fly is called "daddy long-legs" which is also the name for the long-legged spider that we see in our homes! If you approach a vibrating crane fly, it begins to vibrate even faster. While the exact reason for this is not known, it is believed that by vibrating really fast, the crane fly, which is otherwise a clumsy flier, becomes invisible or difficult for a predator to focus on.

Peering at the mating crane flies, I observed that they were clasped together at the abdomen. The crane fly at the bottom, had no other support than the abdominal clasp, and literally, hung in the air. Looking even more closely, I observed that the crane fly which was "hanging loose" was the male, as it had large antennae. The female, which was the one above, had small, rudimentary antennae. The reason for this, is that, typically, males locate the females by their sense of smell, and hence need larger, more powerful antennae. True to their kind, the female, being on top, can literally dump the male once she has finished mating!

An amazing fact about crane flies; of the 4000 odd known species of crane flies worldwide, more than 75% of them have been described by Charles Paul Alexander, an American entomologist, who passed away in 1981! Wow-that's a lot of wobbly crane flies to have examined!

Like all creatures, crane flies play their own role in the natural world. While adult crane flies do not feed, their larva feed on decaying matter, and hence assist in the process of decomposition. Isn't it amazing how nature has assigned roles to different creatures in its intricate web of life?

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Visit the Popular Writing section on the website www.titlitrust.com to view the entire collection of Doon Watch articles online.

Making a difference: You, too, can play your role as a decomposer! Set up a garbage disposal pit in your house. Segregate your wet waste, and throw it into a open pit in your backyard. And nature (possibly along with some help from crane fly larvae) will help decompose your waste!

Photograph caption: Mating crane flies

© Sanjay Sondhi