

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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The myna's story....

Recently, while doing a bit of reading for a book that I am writing for children, I was intrigued to find that the International Union for Conservation of Nature lists the world's top 100 invasive species. Immediately, I did a quick search-was my "hated plant" lantana on the list? Yes-it was! I was glad to note that I was not the only one to detest this plant! While perusing through this list, I was surprised to find that our very own Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) was on this top 100 list.

Apparently, our very own backyard bird, has started occupying other people's backyards! It has spread to many countries outside its natural range, including Australia, Singapore and many Pacific islands. I had visited Australia in the mid 90's and do not recall seeing the bird there in large numbers. As luck would have it, I met an Australian student recently and quizzed her about it. She reacted vociferously-"Indian mynas are everywhere in Australia. They are a pest!" Note, we call them Common mynas, but in Australia, they are called Indian mynas. Given all the recent furore on racism against Indians in Australia, I hope there's nothing sinister about a simple name change!



The Common myna's scientific name, *Acridotheres*, means "grasshopper hunter". These birds were first introduced in many countries to deal with insect pests, little realising that they soon, they would be the pests! Mynas build nests in hollows in

trees, holes in building and any other suitable location they can find. They are very aggressive and territorial-defending their nests, and often chasing away any other birds. Hence, they end up displacing other native bird species, and increasing their own population. Even here in Dehradun, the myna is quite bold and unafraid. Just the other day, a myna hopped down onto the ground near me, quite oblivious to my presence, and pecked on the ground for food. When it did eventually notice me, it gave me a very disdainful look, as though to query “Why are you peering at me? There's nothing for you to eat here!”

The Common mynas are found throughout India, and are commensal with man. They are omnivorous, feeding on insects and vegetable waste and are often found at garbage dumps. One of the cutest sights (I can see some Aussies shuddering-mynas and cute!) of the myna, is seeing them perched on the back of a buffalo or a cow, helping themselves to insects on the backs of cattle.

The myna's story got me thinking. Native to this land, introduced to other lands, and suddenly its a pest. Like so many other actions by man, we did not think this one through. How many other mistakes are we making, tinkering with nature? Anyone out there-thinking and listening!!

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Making a difference: Don't interfere with nature-a simple rule. Each time we cut a tree, raise down a forest, build a new building-we break this rule. There is a balance that can be found between development and the environment. Recently, with the support of the departments of the Forest, Police, Power, PWD and Citizen's for Green Doon, a large 28 year old *Toon* tree was transplanted instead of being chopped down, opposite Drona hotel. Can't we do this more often?