

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

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Batty about Bats!

A couple of months ago, I was at Mussoorie working on the Jabberkhet project (an eco-restoration and eco-tourism venture in Mussoorie involving the local community). We had intended to set up a moth screen at Jabberkhet, but heavy rains forced us to abandon our plans. Hence, we ended up putting up a mercury vapour bulb in the hotel that we were staying at, hoping to attract some moths.

As some moth species fly very late in the night, whenever we set up a moth screen, we usually take turns to check the moth set up every few hours through the night till dawn. As my son, Yash, was with me (and he is as keen as I am to study moths!) we took turns. My last shift was at 3 am in the morning. Getting to the moth spot, a large shadow passed over me. A really big moth, I thought to myself excitedly. A few moments later, the shadow flitted by once again. This is not a moth; it is way too



large, I muttered to myself. On the third sortie of the shadow, I was ready and looking up. A medium sized bat whizzed above my head and settled on the rafters of the roof a short distance away!

With camera in hand, I approached the bat, and kept clicking photographs till I was only two feet away from the bat! The bat hung down from the roof, silhouetted against the green hotel wall, unconcerned by my presence. I managed to get some really good close-ups of the bat, and recognized it to be one of the Horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus* species). They are a quite a few of these bat species in the Himalaya; they get their name from the horseshoe-like projection that they have on their face.

I must admit; I am batty about bats! I find these creatures amazing. The only mammal capable of sustained flight, bats have poor eye-sight, and largely hunt by echo-location. Echo-location involves bats emitting sounds, and based on the echo, detecting and identifying prey and navigating. Bats possess the most efficient biological sonar known to man!

Over the next 15 minutes, I watched as the bat foraged in the hotel lobby. It flew about fearlessly, feeding on insects, especially the moths. Bats are amongst the foremost predators for moths, given that both creatures are largely nocturnal in their habits. As I watched this gorgeous creature feed, a thought came to my mind. Was the bat visiting here because of the large number of moths attracted to the mercury vapour bulb? Was it ethical for me to attract the moths using the light, only to offer the bat a good meal? At three am in the morning I was in no position to really attempt to arrive at any answers, so I parked this ethical question for deliberation at a later time, and just enjoyed watching the bat!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: Simple gestures can make a difference. I re-use the socks that I wear with my shoes when I go for a morning walk, rather than washing them each time I wear them. I actually do this for a whole week (and no, my socks don't stink, so you do not need to avoid me when you meet me next in the morning!).

Photograph caption: Horseshoe Bat at Mussoorie

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