

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

Published on 19 December 2013

The Why Walk

Over the last month, I have conducted two workshops, one at Rajaji National Park for ecology college students and another at Nandhaur Wildlife Sanctuary (Uttarakhand's newest protected area) for local community nature guides and forest staff. At both these training programs, I adopted a training technique that I have found useful in all kinds education forums for the young and the old.

Instead of conducting a nature walk, wherein I only end up showing and identifying species, I enjoy conducting what I call "The Why Walk"! I coined this term during a children's workshop in Nagaland, and they loved it. Every time we used to ask the kids what they wanted to do next, the Why Walk would be a prompt response, letting us know that we had found a simple technique that they enjoyed.

The Why Walk is simple. For everything that you see, ask the question "Why?". We spotted a green myna-sized bird called the Orange-fronted Leafbird on a Ficus tree. The question of why it was on this tree produced many answers, most of which were correct. The leafbird loves to feed on fruit, hence Ficus trees are a favorite place for it to inhabit. The leafbird is leafy green in colour, hence is often seen on broadleaves trees. Why? Because the leafy trees provide them with terrific camouflage.

A little further on, we spotted tiny little cowbugs which were seen on a plant that was teeming with ants. Why? Antbugs are insects which are only a few mm in size and feed on plant sap and are provided protection by the ants. In turn, cowbugs provide a sweet sap for the ants to feed on resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Continuing our walk, we spotted a caterpillar on the ground. It was brightly coloured with prominent spines. Why? Our deliberations provided the answers. The caterpillar, that of the Green Coat Moth, is bitter tasting, hence its bright colours advertise this to its potential predators, which after having tasted it once, avoid it like the plague. The spines cause a terrific itch, so any creature that touches it, doesn't go near the caterpillar again!

A dull brown butterfly called the Common Evening Brown flew up from our feet and settled onto the forest floor. I made all the participants search for it, and they had a great time searching for it. Each time the butterfly flew, it settled quickly, and with its dull, brown brown markings, easily merged with the dry leaves near it. The butterfly's dull markings were easy to understand after the participants had searched for it. The "Why" question had an easy answer-camouflage and protection from potential predators.



Many of these questions were actually answered by the training participants themselves. On most occasions, it only requires a bit of common sense to attempt to figure out why creatures behave in a particular manner or have markings or colours that are spectacular or dull. Fascinating, isn't it?

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

Making a difference: Tools like the Why Walk are a great way to get your kids involved in getting to understand nature better. How about “Why Walking” with your family this weekend?

Photograph caption: Green Coat Moth caterpillar

© Sanjay Sondhi