

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

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Spectacular Swordtails

In early April this year, my wife, Anchal and I made a trip to the Powalgarh Conservation Reserve in the Ramnagar Forest Division, only an hour from Haldwani. The forests of Powalgarh are Corbett country. The great hunter-turned-conservationist spent lots of his time wandering these marvelous forests. Our visit to Corbett country was a recce to explore the forest trails of the conservation reserve in preparation for Uttarakhand's second bird festival, scheduled to be held at Powalgarh from 4-8 February 2015.

Powalgarh was declared as a conservation reserve only in December 2012, and we were excited to be able to trawl its forests. For three days, we trudged through Powalgarh's landscape. We walked the forest trails near Kyari, explored the grassland and forests at Sandani Gaja, and the moister forests, criss-crossed by trickling streams at Sitabani. Walking for 6 to 8 hours daily, we lost ourselves in a myriad of wildlife sightings; spotted deer, hornbills, macaques and langurs and many other wild creatures allowed themselves to be peeked at.

One of the many highlights of this trip was in the form of a spectacular, white coloured butterfly that whizzed past us in the forest, beside the Khichdi River. The butterfly was large, and a swift flier. Based on its flight and general appearance, I immediately recognized it to be a swordtail, and I gestured animatedly to my traveling companions. "Swordtail, it's a swordtail!". As often happens, Anchal and our guides wondered what the excitement was all about. Their nonchalance ended when the butterfly sat on muddy soil, and then their exclamations followed!



We had found a butterfly called the Spot Swordtail. Creamy white below, with brown and red markings, the spectacular butterfly has a pair of long sword-like tails, giving it its common name. The Spot Swordtail is not uncommon even in Dehradun in forested areas, especially near streams and river banks in the warm months between March to May. However, at Powalgarh, the butterfly was quite common and we must have seen at least a dozen individuals. At Sandani Gaja, we had the fortune of seeing 4 Spot Swordtails feeding at a single spot.

When the swordtails feed at moist soil, they alight with quivering wings. For a short while, the butterfly keeps taking to the wing, only to return to its feeding spot. Once the butterfly settles down to feed, and its wingbeats stop, then they are a delight to photograph. If you allow the butterfly to feed and observe it, you can actually see the insect expelling waste fluid from the tip of its abdomen (see the attached pic closely). The spectacular swordtails of Powalgarh really made my day!

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

Making a difference: Interested in birdwatching, wildlife and exploring new areas? If so, mark the dates in your calendar. Uttarakhand's second Bird festival will be held at Powalgarh from 4-8 Feb 2015. Who knows, the swordtail may be still be flying when you visit!

Photograph caption: Spot Swordtail

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