

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

Published on 17 March 2017

Jezebel Tales

A flash of yellow-and-red whizzed by me. I was precariously balanced on a rockslide at Macchli Van, about which I wrote last week. Located in Nandhaur WLS, I was out in the field at Macchli Van, with a group of fellow birdwatchers, receiving the birding trails for the 4th Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival. One of the trails at Macchli Van required us to negotiate a steep rockslide, in order to access the jungle trail above Nandhaur River. It was on this rockpile that I stood, camera in one hand, binoculars in the other, teetering this way and that, while a dainty butterfly flew overhead, giving me just a few glimpses. I was grappling with my footing, trying to stand still, as I attempting to bring around my camera to squeeze off a shot of the butterfly. I had already ascertained that I had spotted something special.

The butterfly obliged for a few seconds, settling on nearby flower cluster of *Buddleja*, allowing me to squeeze off a few photographs for identification. I had my confirmation-the butterfly was the Red-breast Jezebel (*Delias acalis*). This pretty black, yellow and red butterfly, belonging to the Whites and Yellows family, has an interesting story behind it. The range of this species has caused much discussion over the past few decades. In 1932, Evans, in his book “The Identification of Indian Butterflies” wrote that the distribution of this species extended from Shimla eastwards to E. Himalaya. Wynter-Blyth, in his book “Butterflies of the Indian Region”, published in 1957, questioned its presence in Himachal Pradesh and Garhwal/Kumaon and stated that it occurred from Nepal eastwards. Much later, Peter Smetacek published a paper in 2001, stating that he had a few records of this species from Kumaon, confirming its presence in Uttarakhand. And now, I had photographic evidence of it occurring in Nandhaur WLS in E. Kumaon, reconfirming that its presence in Uttarakhand.

Jezebel stories always takes me back to a visit to Eaglenest WLS in Arunachal Pradesh in 2016, with a Japanese, Hiro, and some of his English friends. All of us were ardent butterfly watchers, and we spent 10 days wandering about in Arunachal Pradesh. During the visit, they shared their experiences of a visit to Papua. The islands of Papua are located in the Pacific Ocean, east of Indonesia and north of Australia. Hiro and his friends had made a visit to these islands, primarily to see jezebel butterflies. They showed me some photographs and I was left dazzled! The jezebel butterflies they had photographed were incredibly beautiful. I was left even more stunned, when they informed me that Papua was home to 260 species of jezebel butterflies; and they were only able to see 30 of these! To put this in perspective, India has only 9 species of jezebels. What ecological events caused an explosion in jezebel diversity in Papua remains unknown. If only I could visit to find out! “Dream

on, Mr. Sondhi”, I muttered to myself. A visit to Papua involves incredible expense and a great deal of planning, so I would have to remain satisfied with the photographs of Hiro and his friends!

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



Photograph caption: Red-breast Jezebel at Nandhaur WLS

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