

YOUNG WORLD

Menagerie on the Silver Oak



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An Australian native, it has been introduced in India. But that has not stopped birds and insects from flocking to it.

I consider myself fortunate to be able to enjoy a fabulous view outside my bedroom window. On the fifth floor of an apartment block, my window is at the canopy level of a rain tree and standing next to it and towering over it, is an old Silver Oak.

An Australian native, the Silver Oak (*Grevillea robusta*) is an exotic tree, seen mostly in urban spaces. An 'exotic' means a plant or an animal which has been introduced, and is not native to a geographical region. It is tall, elegant, fast growing, with leaves resembling fern fronds. I had never noticed its flowering properly in the past, except that it had a yellow smattering of blossoms. But now, in close proximity to the tree the inflorescence it bears reminds me of a bright yellow comb whose teeth are curved and bent inwards. The flowers have no petals; instead they have a long calyx that splits into four lobes.

What intrigues me most is the number of bird species that visit this tree. But even before I share my week-long observations, I would like to say here that an exotic species is not the best choice when we think of planting trees or shrubs. Exotics can propagate profusely due to lack of competition, and threaten native species. Much of our fauna depends on native species for their various needs, and if exotics push out natives, the fauna suffers. For e.g most insects lay eggs on native species. If those plants reduce drastically in numbers, the insect species gets affected, and the predators of that insect, like birds, or lizards,

will, in turn, get affected. So an entire food chain gets disturbed. We have to respect the fact that the native plants and the fauna which thrive on them, have an age-old relationship, formed over years of evolutionary processes.

Regular visitors

Coming back to my observations, the mornings begin with the feisty bulbuls making their presence felt. As the day progresses, the next lot of visitors come in – the drongos and the mynahs.

When the tree is clear of voracious feeders, the delicate birds start making their presence felt. I have seen coppersmiths (barbets) hop from branch to branch. It looked like they were scouting more for nesting sites than for food. The tailorbirds and the white-eyes are regulars, flitting in and out, and their friends, the Cinereous tits are occasional winter visitors.

Trees provide a useful perch for many birds and at times, they become hunting grounds. I once saw a shikra sit at the far end of a branch silently for over an hour, and though I did not see it fly off, or lunge at any bird, I cannot help but wonder the fate of the poor tits that were hopping around that evening.

Mammals, like squirrels are constantly feeding on the flowers, and come dusk, the bats start congregating on it.

The silver oak actually taught me that without being the revered banyan, or the much talked about medicinal neem, or even fruit bearing (like mango or chikoo), it still has a niche role to play, like everything else in Nature, and it plays it wonderfully, standing tall, humble and upright.

I have seen it getting lashed by strong winds and battered by heavy rain, and it held out gracefully.

Sometimes it gets into a playful mood when the light summer breeze flirts with it. It sways about, displaying the silvery backs of its leaves glistening in the sun, reminding me about how it got its name!

Inputs from Dr. Parag Mahajan

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