

Living in harmony

RNAJIT LAL *in collaboration with Kalpavriksh/ National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*

The Delhi Ridge abounds with wild life — from the Rhesus macaque to the pop eyed mongoose... Environment experts write on biodiversity in this new monthly column.



Coppersmith barber...

It's a huge impressive sounding word, isn't it — biodiversity. And basically it means, all the living creatures that share the world with us. And I must admit, I have a big problem with biodiversity.

I think there is too much of it! I mean I set off for a walk to the Delhi Ridge just to relax and enjoy the weather, and what happens? I am immediately assaulted by the biodiversity of the place! At the entrance, a huge gang of Rhesus macaques is lying in wait to waylay anyone with peanuts or wafers or bananas or whatever. Anyway, I sneak past them and sidle towards one of the bird feeding spots, which I hope the monkeys haven't ransacked. On the way I'm given a fright by the loud, raucous 'waark-waark-waark!' call of the white-breasted waterhen. At the spot, are a couple of grey francolins, some collared doves, a gang of jungle babblers, and of course chilli green parakeets, all busy scoffing the grain and breadcrumbs. I take out the camera and what happens? Bhrrr! They're all off.

A pop-eyed mongoose has sidled up and is busy cleaning up the breadcrumbs and disappointed that it hasn't managed to nab a babbler. Before I can focus on him, something lands at the tip of my camera lens: A magenta dragonfly, glittering in the sunlight. How do you take a picture of a dragonfly posed on your lens? And now something decidedly unfriendly is climbing up my trouser leg. God, I've stepped in the path of a marching column of ants that will tolerate no barriers! I brush them off and step away, straight into a spiky thornbush, which grips me lovingly, sinking its talons into my calf.

(Of course it is only protecting itself, but tell that to my bleeding leg!) Then, a shrill urgent `ki-kee' has me fumbling for my binoculars.

That's a favourite bird of mine — the shikra! The calls are interspersed with those of a squirrel sounding frantic. Up there on a branch, the shikra has semi-unfurled its wings, and is coming after the squirrel, which can only back up, squeaking. Before anything can happen, three tree-pies land up, chucking aggressively, and ambush the hawk. The squirrel flees.

Okay, I decide, let me look at some butterflies. I settle in front of a patch of lantana (much hated by all, but loved by butterflies — that's diversity for you!) where I know plain tigers and jezebels and orange tips will be cavorting. Sure they are, but what on earth is that lantana stalk doing to that butterfly there? Eating it, by all appearances. It is of course, a beautifully disguised stick insect, the idol of anyone on a slimming exercise! So you can see, this biodiversity thing can be a bit distracting. It's rather like looking inside a kaleidoscope that is shaken every time you blink! Actually of course, it's all part of a beautiful machine called life on earth, and each creature is like some working part. Destroy the part, or take it out, and the machine will chug on somehow. But keep on doing that, and one day the machine will go kaput. (Take one spark- plug out of your car and it will continue to sputter on. Take all the plugs out and it'll go dead.) We in India (and me on the Delhi Ridge) are millionaires as far as biodiversity goes. And while it does drive me nuts on my rambles on the Ridge, I shudder to imagine what my walks would be like if I met just one kind of bird, and one kind of butterfly, and one kind of tree or bush and hardly any insects at all.