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A Close Encounter with the Wall Creeper

Returning from a recent visit to the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttarakhand, I was driving down to Dehradun with some friends. I detest driving but, as walking over two hundred kilometers was not really an option-I found myself behind the wheel. Driving grouchily, my imagination ran amuck, wondering what it would take to have someone to invent a “transporter” which could instantaneously ferry people from one place to another, avoiding the crowded streets of Uttarakhand hilly towns.

Mother nature is good reader of minds. And sensing my foul mood, she decided to make things worse! We had perambulated past Okhimath and Kund, and then struggled our way through the small, congested, town of August Muni. A series of vehicles blocked the road ahead, and my heart sank-”Oh, oh-here comes trouble!”. A massive landslide had completely blocked the road, and we were left staring at a small bulldozer, dwarfed by a huge boulder. Small town talk prevailed with a wide range of opinions being proffered. “*Yeh to aaj nahi khulega*”(The road will not open today) said one person. “*Nahi-ek ghante mein khul jayega*“(No, the road will open in an hour!) responded another person. Despondently, we stood at the spot where the road widening was in progress and mulled our options. A few feet from us, I espied a movement on the embankment beside the road. A quick glance, and a flash of grey, black and crimson made me forget all about blocked roads! On the vertical mud bank, only a few feet away, a small bird flitted up and down. A Wallcreeper!



The Wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria*) is a petite, sparrow-sized, grey bird, with black wings, which are embellished with crimson and white markings. The Wallcreeper, as its name suggests, does just that-creeps and crawls along rock faces, cliffs and mud banks. With its long, down-curved black bill, it probes for insects and spiders in nooks and corners, ferreting out food from locations that few other birds reach. Even as the bird feeds, it perches on a rock for just an instant, its wings spread out like a tent over its body, before it begins to flick its wings, and resumes its search for tasty morsels. As its wings spread, it displays bright crimson markings. Look at my colours-it seems to say! Photograph me-and we did just that!

Found throughout the Himalayas, in the summer, the bird breeds at higher altitudes, all the way to the snow line. Come winter, as availability of food at higher altitudes reduces, the bird descends to the foothills and even the plains. Occasionally, it can be seen within the city limits and there are records of the bird from Delhi as well. The Wallcreeper's preferred habitat is rocky gorges and cliffs, but building walls and archeological ruins suit it just fine, if there is food to be had! The bird has a distinct but weak “*tsee, tsee, tsee*” call note and a very distinct, looping flight, which is unmistakable after the first sighting. When driving through the Himalayan foothills, in suitable habitat, it is seen quite commonly from the car itself.

The Wallcreeper should not be confused with the superficially similar Spotted Creeper (*Salpornis spilonotus*) which is found sporadically in central India. The Spotted Creeper is brown and completely lacks the crimson colour on its wings.

Watching the Wallcreeper forage, thoughts of the “transporter” were duly banished, as for the next 15 minutes, our close encounter with the Wallcreeper left us enthralled. From only a few feet away,

we watched it in its quest for food, flicking its wings, showing-off its colours to us. All morbid thoughts of landslides and the accompanying delays were forgotten, Nature had applied its balm, and I thought to myself-for sights like these, I would tolerate many more landslides!

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