

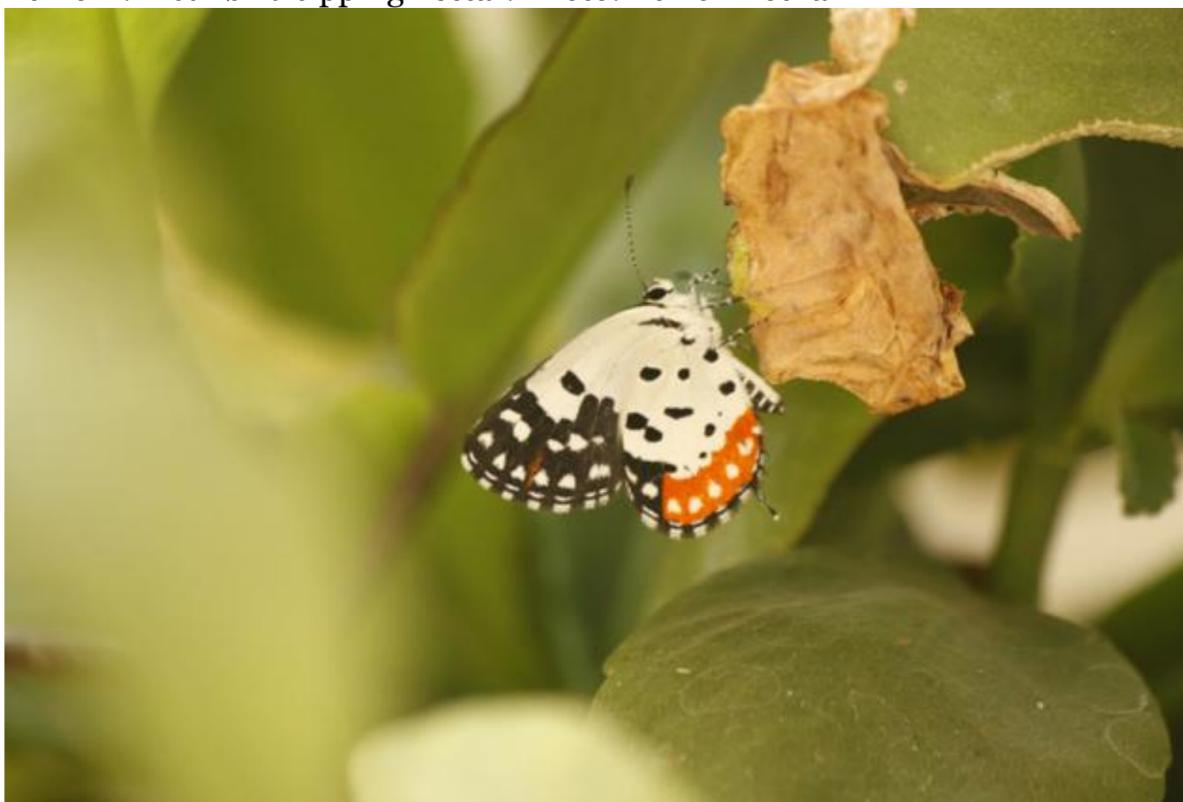
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My wild visitors

- [Sujatha Padmanabhan](#)



At work: A sunbird sipping nectar. Photo: Ashish Kothari



Pretty Sight: A Red Pierrot. Photo: Sujata Padmanabhan

How would it be to have friends of a different sort visit you? An invitation would mean selecting plants that would interest them!

A sudden movement on my balcony caught my eye. I stepped out to see a small and strikingly beautiful butterfly flutter over one of my pots. My heart leapt with joy! It was a Red Pierrot. This tiny visitor had decided to visit me, even though I live on the ninth floor of an apartment complex.

Yellow and red

Well honestly, I wasn't the reason for the visit. It was a plant called "Kalanchoe" that a kind gardener had given me, which this butterfly was visiting. Well, the gardener was no ordinary person. I had met him at a "butterfly park" run by the Pune Municipal Corporation. He had been trained in designing parks for butterflies, and had learnt to not only recognise different butterfly species but also their eggs, caterpillars and pupae. And more importantly he knew what plants to grow to attract butterflies. Butterflies are fussy and require specific plants (referred to as host plants) on which to lay their eggs and whose leaves their caterpillars feed on.

I would not have noticed the Kalanchoe plants in the butterfly garden. They were small plants with succulent-like leaves. However the gardener turned some leaves over to show us caterpillars of the Red Pierrot. Just like the gardener, these were no ordinary caterpillars either! They bore into the leaves and eat away at the tissue from within!

Another host plant that I grew on my balcony, the seeds of which I took from the butterfly garden, was one called *haldi kumkum* (or scarlet milkweed) after its beautiful red and yellow flowers. I germinated these from seed and wondered if any butterflies would get attracted to

them. I had seen many large butterflies hover over these flowers at the garden, including the commonly seen Plain Tiger butterfly.

I watched them grow tall and lanky in my pot and then finally flower. Time to attract butterflies I thought and kept a keen eye on it. At last I saw a movement amongst the flowers and cautiously made my way to the balcony. It was a tiny bird this time, a sunbird, sipping away at the nectar.

I now try to keep these plants alive in the hope that some wildlife visits me in my balcony. It's a great feeling to know that what you have chosen to plant is refuge or food for another creature. Try it...find out what you can plant in your school compound or in your home garden to encourage little visitors to come over.

This series on Conservation and Nature is brought to you by Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group

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