

Urban Nature Watch for TerraGreen by Sanjay Sondhi

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Pop Goes The Weasel

Early one monsoon morning, I strode down the road in the quaint hill station of Dalhousie in Himachal Pradesh. It had rained the previous night, and despite being pre-occupied, the gorgeous smell of rain on soil permeated through my wandering thoughts. I was on my way to participate in a school nature education program, and was thinking about the event.

Despite my pre-occupation, I was jolted out of my reverie by a small chestnut coloured head that poked its head out of sorrel growing on the hillside. A dog, I thought to myself. Almost immediately, the head popped out again, and disappeared. Pointed snout, I noted, and very wary. Not a dog, I told myself and stopped stomping down the road. Sure enough, a few moments later,



the head popped out again, and this time, the animal peered at me curiously. Excitedly, I realized that the animal was the Himalayan Weasel *Mustela sibirica*, and I was no more than a few feet from it! Standing rock still, I waited for the weasel to re-appear.

A game of hide-and-seek followed, with the weasel poking its head out from the shrubbery, finding that I was still standing by the road, and scurrying back again. A few minutes of “see me if you can” followed. I realized that the weasel wanted to cross the road and I was in its way. Just as I had decided to move on, the weasel popped out again. This time, it did not disappear. From only a few feet away, the weasel looked me in the eye. Cocking its head this way and that, it checked me out. Possibly a sixth sense told the animal that I was a “friend”, hence its curiosity and desire to cross the road got the better of the weasel.

Amazingly, a silent conversation followed. The weasel looked at me inquisitively-“Where are you headed?” it seemed to ask. “I am headed for a nature education workshop for school children.” I

said. "Great, Do save our forests, or else we will not be around much longer." was my interpretation of the weasel's response. "Will do so" I replied silently. Hopping from the hill slope onto the road, with a nonchalant "*see ya*", the weasel was on its way. A good omen, I thought to myself. The program's gonna go off well.

The Himalayan weasel (also called the Siberian weasel), a resident of Himalayan coniferous forests is seen occasionally in the Himalayan hill stations of India. An incorrigible chicken stealer, it often forages near garbage dumps. The close encounter with the cute weasel, with its rust coloured coat, white snout and throat with piercing, but knowledgeable eyes, left a huge impact on me. During the nature education program, I related my imaginary dialogue with the weasel to the school children, who were delighted with my story.

Waking back from the event, intuitively, I took the same route back. Pleased with the way the program had gone, and invigorated by the response of the school children, I walked back with a peppy stride. Turning around the same corner on the road, the weasel popped out again! Looking at me with its beady eyes "How'd it go?" it seemed to ask. "Terrific" I said softly. "Our children seem to care for the world and there is hope for our forests and the environment."

The weasel seemed to look at me quizzically "So you want the children to save what you grown ups could not? Huh? Weird!" With one last look at me, with an expression that was part hope and part disbelief, the weasel went on its way. And left me thinking.

Are children to bear the brunt of fixing the earth's destruction? What about the responsibility of us as adults? Why do I see many environmental campaigns involving only kids in India? Where are the responsible, intelligent, grown ups? Busy making money, pillaging earth's resources for a better future for our kids? The weasel left me with a sobering thought-children's education programs are terrific, well intentioned and desirable. But who is going to wake up and educate the grown ups?

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