

## Urban Nature Watch for TerraGreen by Sanjay Sondhi

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Snakes-To loathe or not to loathe!

Over the past few months, I have been assisting some young friends, who are budding herpetologists. Herpetology, for the uninitiated, is the study of amphibians and reptiles. In order to introduce them to “herping” (slang for searching for “herps”!) I took them out at night into a nearby forest, which is when many “herps” are active.

My young friends were excited-how many snakes are we gonna see? Not wanting to play spoilsport, I broke the news to them gently, that “herping” was tough, arduous work, with only chance encounters with snakes. Sure enough, we did get to see a few frogs that night, but no snakes.

A few days later, I got an excited call from my young friends. We have caught a snake. I went over to meet them, and sure enough, they had caught a slender, black snake with pairs of white bands across the body. “Who caught it and how”, I asked? And one of my young friends replied. “Well, we saw the snake in our courtyard in a corner. A great commotion followed, we surrounded the snake, and I caught it with my bare hands!” Whoops! The snake they had caught was the Common krait *Bungarus caeruleus*.



My young friend was fortunate. The Common krait's bite can be fatal. It is one of the four venomous snakes that are found in urban habitat in India along with the Spectacled cobra, Russell's viper and the Saw-scaled viper. Despite the recklessness of my young colleagues, there was still a lesson for all of us in this episode. Most venomous snakes don't necessarily bite humans. They might do so, if threatened, but otherwise, most snakes will just slither

away harmlessly.

The krait looks very similar to the Common wolf snake, which is a common, docile and non-venomous snake that often enters homes. Kraits, too, enter homes occasionally, and people mistakenly handle it, assuming that it is not venomous. The only way to be absolutely certain is to examine the scales on the back of the snakes. Unlike the Common Wolf Snake, the Common krait has hexagonal scales along its back.

We took the krait into the forest nearby, and put it down onto the ground. The two foot long reptile, immediately coiled up, and tucked its head under its body, something that kraits do quite often. I took a long hard look at its scales, and indeed it was hexagonal.

The snake made no attempt to flee allowing me to take a few photographs, including one of its scales. Every now and then, its tongue flickered out. The snake's tongue picks up odours, so the krait was obviously checking what deodorant we had on! After ascertaining that we were “clean” (and no, I don't wear any cologne, notwithstanding the Axe effect!), the snake slithered off into the foliage.

Snakes have an undeserved reputation for being evil, and many people loathe them. I recall a training session that I was conduct in Meghalaya recently with locals from the Garo hills. During the training session, I showed them a picture of a snake, and I asked the people in the room “*Isko dekhne pe kya karte ho?*” (What do you do when you see this?). The immediate response was “*Mar deta hai!*” (We kill it!). In turn, I gently lead the team to dwell on what the snakes eat. And the response I got was “rats”, which was correct. A little more prodding and I got the participants to figure out for themselves that snakes are significant predators of rodents, and perform an important role in controlling their population, thereby reducing the damage to crops in the fields and stored grains. Very soon, I had people nodding in the room with the realisation that the web of life meant that by killing snakes, they were actually doing rodents a favour and harming themselves!

So for you ophidiophobic (*ophio*=snake, *phobia*=*fear*) people out there; more people in India die in road accidents than from snake bites, so give up your irrational fear and watch out for the vehicle the next time you cross the road instead of fearing snakes!

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