

Thank goodness for some things

How birds and animals continue to survive in our cities where their space is diminishing

By Sujatha Padmanabhan

When I sat down to write this piece, my mind raced through some of the exciting wildlife encounters that I have had in the past: seeing a python in Pench National Park, a snow leopard in Ladakh, a Satyr tragopan in Sikkim. But suddenly, I heard a call of a little bird and my mind wandered along a very different path...

Spotted deer

I thought about the wildlife encounters I have had in cities: a spotted deer in a compound in Chennai, a saw-scaled viper in Pune, a greater adjutant stork in Guwahati. It is indeed a marvel that so many animals continue to survive in our cities, despite the fact that our urban spaces are increasingly cemented, its trees cut, its water bodies polluted and destroyed by an ever growing human population. It says something for their



Tickell's blue flycatcher. PHOTO: SUJATHA PADMANABHAN

staying power!

I work in Pune and my office is situated in the centre of the city, an area with many commercial buildings, hospitals and colleges. Luckily, however, it is on a road that is a dead end and that still has a few large trees standing.

It was the year 2009 and the end of March. I was slowly making my way to office. I was lost in thought, but all of a sudden froze as my eyes just happened to catch a dry leaf which was falling down. Suddenly, the leaf seemed to acquire a life of its own, and it flew up to a branch of a fig tree and settled down!

Brown leaf!

I looked closer to discover that the brown leaf was indeed a butterfly! It opened its wings every now and then to reveal a

blue band on its inner wing surface. I was spellbound as I watched it flit from branch to branch. Every time it sat with

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Blue oakleaf butterfly. PHOTO: ISAAC KEHIMKAR

its wings closed, it looked like a dry brown leaf. The underside of the wings resembled a dried leaf, with even a marking like a midrib.

I realised at once that this was a protective mechanism for the butterfly. Probably many a bird missed swooping down on it, being fooled into thinking that it was just a dead leaf!

Soon web searches and email exchanges with a butterfly-expert and friend, confirmed that it was a Blue Oakleaf butterfly, one that usually is found in forested areas but has been seen in Pune occasionally!

Charming bird

The second instance was a charming bird that visited us in the summer of the following year, a Tickell's blue flycatcher. It must have decided to nest in one of the trees near our office. We first noticed it when it announced its presence as it uttered a tuneful warble. Soon we got used to its presence, though the call was enticing enough for us to leave our work tables to see if we could get a glimpse of it in the thicket. And if we did, it was a worthwhile distraction from work: the male, a small blue bird, a little bigger than a sparrow, with a rusty coloured



A mongoose sipping milk. PHOTO: PANKAJ SEKHSARIA

throat and breast and a little white on the abdomen.

Mongoose

The third instance was to do with a family of mongooses that lived somewhere near our office. We would often see them dart across our lane, one behind the other in single file in an orderly school-like fashion! One morning a colleague called our attention to one of them. The mongoose was drinking milk kept for a pet cat outside a neighbour's home! This was over eight years ago. However, in the years that followed, the mongooses disappeared. We

wondered what may have happened and could only speculate on the reasons. Was it the increasing construction work in the lane as old buildings were being pulled down and were replaced by new ones? Was it the increase in the number of cars that were parked in the lane?

This summer I have reason to celebrate! One evening in April, as a few of us were going back home, we spotted the Blue Oakleaf butterfly around the same fig tree where I had first seen it three years ago. We watched it glide gently, appearing so leaf-like till it settled down and opened its wings every now

and then to reveal its blue band. Just a few days later, we glimpsed a mongoose dart across the road. It made its way to a patch of water in our neighbour's compound whose garden had just been watered. We watched it sipping away thirstily, and laughed as we recalled the milk incident. And as I write this piece for the Deccan Herald Student newspaper, I can hear the Tickell's blue flycatcher sing away. It has returned to remind me of its staying power and to entice me once more to leave my desk.

(The writer is with Kalpavriksh)