

## **Urban Nature Watch for TerraGreen**

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### **The antics of the Fan-throated lizard**

Standing on a beach in Tuticorin in southern India, I watched as fishermen drew in their fishing nets. I was contemplating a quick perusal of their day's catch, when I espied a flash of blue from the corner of my eye, on the sand banks beside me. Must be plastic litter on the beach, drifting with the breeze, I thought. A few seconds later, the flash of blue darted past my feet. Amazingly fast plastic, if that's actually what it was, I muttered to myself. Intrigued, I turned my attention to the dash of blue.

A few feet away, a small lizard stood motionless on the sand. No blue here, I told myself. Even I was looking at the sand wondering what in the world had attracted my attention, when the lizard's throat suddenly flapped open and a dazzling blue and red colour flashed at me! I stood transfixed for a few moments before it dawned on me-I was watching the Fan-throated lizard *Sitana ponticeriana*.

The lizard, a male, stood on its haunches, arrogantly, giving me the glare. Apparently I had intruded on his territory without prior permission. Even as I watched the lizard, it climbed onto a dried thorny branch on a Prosopis bush, and continued to flap its fan-like skin at me. Perched precariously on the edge of the branch, the lizard posed for me for well over 5 minutes, allowing me to take as many photographs as I liked. The lizard seemed to be saying-click away, make me famous.

Eventually, as the avaricious photographer in me got too close for comfort for the lizard, he hopped off the branch, and



head up in the air, ran away into the bushes on its two hind legs. The bi-pedaled dash of the lizard as it scampered away, using only its hind legs, with the rest of the body raised above the ground, presented a really comical sight.

The adult Fan-throated lizard is four inches long, plus a six inch long tail. It is grey-brown in colour and has a series of dark, diamond shaped markings on the back, which help identify the lizard. In addition, it is one of the few lizards found in India with only four toes on its hind feet; most other lizards have five toes.

The Fan-throated lizard uses its flashy throat “fan” to attract the female. Females are duller than the males, and lack the throat appendage. During the breeding season, numerous males can be seen, displaying their fanciful colours, hoping to lure the female. Hey look at me-I am the best dressed male around. Bond with the best, they seem to say. Competition for Reid and Taylor and Big B!

The lizard can be seen commonly in dry terrain such as sandy beaches, rocky outcrops and even barren fields throughout peninsular India. In Tuticorin, I saw many lizards on the beach, and in scrubland within the city limits.

Lizards, like all reptiles are cold-blooded creatures, which means, that unlike humans, they cannot regulate their body temperature, and are dependent on the heat of the sun to do so. Hence the Fan-throated lizard, which is active during the day, can often be seen sunning itself in the early morning sun, in an attempt to get to an optimal temperature, which will allow it to feed. Often, when it gets really hot, the lizards open their mouths to dissipate heat, much like panting dogs!

Reptiles, especially snakes and lizards are often reviled by us humans, little realizing that these creatures feed on insects, rodents and other small animals, thereby keeping pest populations under control. The Fan-throated lizard, too, feeds on insects such as termites, bugs, beetles and grasshoppers which cause damage to crops. So the next time you see a flash of blue on a beach near you, check out whether its a Fan-throated lizard, and salute it for the stellar service it performs to mankind.

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