Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi

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Furry Friend

Strolling down Sahastradhara Road on our morning walk, I heard a birdlike call in the distance. I wondered what this unfamiliar bird call could be. I followed the calls and lo behold, I found a pair of squirrels trilling away.

The sight of the squirrels at Sahastradhara Road brought back a flood of memories. My first encounter with the squirrel was almost four decades ago, when I was a child, growing up in the Steel City-the town of Jamshedpur. The garden in our house had trees of guava, sal and mango, and these furry little creatures were a constant presence throughout the year. One morning I happened to spot a small furry creature hugging the ground below a tree. Curious, I approached the animal, and found a baby squirrel, no more than 3 inches in size. The squirrel had fallen out of its nest, which is built up in the trees. The squirrel was too young to survive on its own, so I had no option but to pick it up in an attempt to save it. So started my love affair with Mitsy, which is what I named the tiny squirrel.

We fed the little squirrel diluted milk to begin with, and to our pleasure, it survived, and grew. Soon it was big enough to eat solid food including bread, nuts, biscuits and a host of other human food. Mitsy grew quickly, and in a few weeks, we knew that she was going to make it. For the first few months, Mitsy was a delightful addition to the family (with the exception of my dog, who hated the diversion of attention!). Misty would delicately perch on my shoulder, often climbing up into my shirtsleeves in search of warmth and protection. Watching her eat was a source of unending delight ; the tiny squirrel would sit up cutely; hold a tidbit of food in her front paws, and nibble away, alert all the while, to ensure nobody tried to grab the morsel of food from her.

It was my intention to release Mitsy back into the wild. Once she was old enough, with heavy hearts, we decide that it was time for her to go. But Misty had other ideas-while she did venture out into the garden, she made her way back into the house, and into our hearts. Over the next two years, Mitsy provided us with un-ending pleasure. Mitsy lived with us, often foraying out into the garden, but always coming back. She would readily sit on my shoulder, surveying all around her; with one eye on the dog, who still eyed her jealously.

Mitsy met with a sad ending; she chewed through electrical wiring and died of the shock-a subtle reminder to us not to interfere with nature's ways. I recall

wondering…what could I have done to ensure that she stayed in the wild instead of coming home. Over the years, I rescued quite a few other baby squirrels, but made the effort to ensure that they went back into the wild. If you ever come across a squirrel or any other animal in need of help-do assist, but ensure you send it back where it belongs-in nature.

The squirrel's common name is the Three-striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum)* and it belongs to the rodent family. Legend has it that the squirrel helped Lord Rama in the construction of the Adi Sethu bridge at Rameshwaram. Lord Rama, pleased with the squirrel's dedication ran his fingers over the body of the squirrel, leaving three stripes.

The ubiquitous squirrel is a common sight in most gardens. So common, that often, we don't give these adorable animals a second glance. These immensely likable furry creatures are a delight to watch, so the next time you see one, pause, and observe them for a while. If nothing else, point them out to your children and make them aware of Mother Nature's gifts to us….lets give our children the chance to save what we could not…

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

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