

Doon Watch Series in Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi

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Garden Lizard-The Bloodsucker

Observing nature is fascinating. On numerous occasions, I marvel at the similarities between what occurs in the natural world, and in our own day to day lives. Without actually realizing it, humans are still quite primal in their behavior!

A few weeks ago, I observed a lizard sitting on the stem of a plant in our garden. For the next week, every morning, I noticed that the lizard continued to sit in the same position, without any apparent movement. I was intrigued. I approached the lizard cautiously, not wanting to disturb it. Closer observation revealed that the lizard was a juvenile Garden Lizard *Calotes versicolor* with its skin peeling off.

When humans grow, their body parts including the bones and skin grows as well. Not so with reptiles. Hence as snakes and lizards grow, they outgrow their skin, and hence need to shed it. This process is called moulting. Most of us would have seen snake skins lying along roadsides. While snakes shed their entire skin, in the case of lizards, the outer skin comes off like paint peeling off a wall! Unlike us, who are prone to wasteful lifestyles, the lizard normally eats its own skin after moulting-not wanting to waste any food.



The Garden Lizard belongs to a Lizard Family called Agamids. It is the commonest garden lizard and is found throughout India in most habitats. The lizard is seen during the day (diurnal) and is most commonly seen on trees or bushes (arboreal) though, it does

often venture to the ground. Lizards, being reptiles are “cold-blooded” animals, unlike birds and mammals which are “warm-blooded”. Hence reptiles need the sun to regulate their body temperatures. In a city like Dehradun, which has a fairly cold winter, the lizards will reduce their activity significantly during the winter months.

The Garden Lizard is commonly called the Bloodsucker. And as a young boy, I remember being terrified of it. The story I was told was that if the lizard bit you, it would also suck out your blood, hence its name-the Bloodsucker. Nothing could be further from the truth! The male lizard is usually sandy-grey colored but during the breeding season, its head turns a bright red in order to attract the female. Not unlike us-where prospective brides and grooms dress up to impress their counterparts!

During the breeding season (April-September), male lizards are territorial and often intimidate other males by doing “push ups” whereby the lizard moves its body up and down on its front legs. Male lizards often get into fights with other male rivals over territory and females...sounds a familiar human story! In addition to adopting a red color on the head, the male lizard also uses “push ups” during courtship of the female-perhaps showing the female that it is trying to develop “six pack abs” (Bollywood-you have competition!). Female lizards lay eggs in burrows up to a foot in the ground. The eggs take up to 8 weeks to hatch and small lizards emerge with voracious appetites. The lizards feed primarily on insects and hence assist in controlling pests.

Human life often mimics nature whether the aggression of male lizard, their fights for territory or females, their mechanisms of courtship-we have a lot in common! If only we can learn from them as well. For example-lizards don't waste food even eating their own moulted skin...today even in India we often waste food even as millions go hungry. Lizards learn to conserve energy in the winter by hibernating-they realize that when their “fuel” (food) runs low, they have to devise mechanisms to conserve them. We, as humans, have yet to learn to conserve energy, even by simple means such as putting off lights and fans in our homes when they are not required. Can we learn from nature?

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Making a difference: Conserve energy. Make an effort to put off unwanted lights and fans in your homes. And teach your children to do the same.