Doon Watch Series in Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi

Published on 5 December 2008

The Giant Wood Spider
A few weeks ago, my wife, Anchal and I sauntered down Rajpur Road on an early morning stroll. The sun shone brightly, and between two tall trees along the roadside, I noticed something glistening. Closer examination revealed that it was a large spider web shimmering in the sunlight. We looked more closely, and spotted the spider on the web. The spider was huge-about three inches in size, and colored yellow and black. It was the Giant Wood Spider *Nephila maculata*! The spider's large web, between the two trees, was at least 5 feet across.

I was surprised-in Pune and surrounds, the Giant Wood Spider is a creature primarily of the forests, while in Dehradun, we spotted one right on Rajpur Road! Knowing a bit about the life history of the Giant Wood Spider, I asked Anchal to look for another spider on the web. She looked, and sure enough, at the edge of the web, we spotted a smaller, insignificant reddish-brown spider, less than quarter of an inch in size. The large black and yellow spider we saw on the web was the female, while the smaller spider was the male.

The life history of the Giant Wood Spider is fascinating. The spiders are not seen at all through the months of January through to June/July. Young spiders first appear on small webs in the months of August and September. As they develop and mature, they spin larger and larger webs. As they grow, the spiders moult, or shed their skin, numerous times. The spiders are ready to mate by September/October. Typically, numerous smaller males sit at the edge of the female spider's web. When the female is ready to mate, she selects one of them. A few days after mating, the male dies, having served his purpose for existence! On occasion, after she mates, the female spider proceeds to eat the male-why waste a good meal! After a few weeks, the female leaves the web to lay dozens of eggs in an egg sac or cocoon, in a concealed location. The female then dies and leaves the cocoon with eggs to the care of Mother Nature. The eggs take months to hatch. When favorable weather arrives with the onset of the monsoons, the eggs hatch and dozens of spider hatchlings emerge, right about the time when food is abundant. And, imagine, all of this happens before our very eyes on Rajpur Road! So the next time you amble through Dehradun's roads, watch out for this webbed wonder.

Spiders evoke different responses in people, varying from disgust to repulsion and even fear, but the fact remains that spiders are not dangerous to man, and beneficial in many ways. They provide us an insight into the health of our eco-

systems. The Giant Wood Spider feeds on mosquitoes and flies, though on occasion I have seen it devour large butterflies as well. By being voracious eaters of insects, spiders help control the pest population, which are potentially harmful to man, animals and even plants. For people who dread spiders-its time to get over your fear! While the Black Widow Spider's female has enough venom to kill a human, it is not found in India. In fact, India does not have any venomous spiders.

©Sanjay Sondhi

Seeing the Giant Wood Spider on Rajpur Road was a magnificent reminder of the city's natural history diversity. Such delights in Dehradun abound, but how much longer. Only recently, in the name of development, numerous trees were mowed down on Chakrata road. How many Giant Wood Spiders lost their homes? How many other creatures lost out as well? And we lost out as well-trees our lungs for cities, providing much needed oxygen. Was there an alternative? Could the city have found another way out, balancing development and the city's greenery? These are questions that we will need to answer for ourselves….and for our children.

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

Making a difference: Everyone of us can make a difference. Have you tried to stop using plastic bags and using cloth bags instead? Give it a try.