

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

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Fantail Flycatchers-The Belly Dancers

Last week, we spent a wonderful morning walking in the *sal* forests of Kaduapani, in south-western part of Dehradun. During the walk, we came face to face with a pretty yellow colored bird. The bird sat only a few feet from us, proceeded to give us a free dance performance. The bird, the Yellow-bellied Fantail, sat on the branch of a low bush, and twisted this way and that, spreading its fan-shaped tail, pirouetting gracefully.



We spent fifteen minutes watching the bird perform with the grace of a belly dancer, shaking its yellow belly. The bird kept coming back to the same spot, seemingly saying-I have an audience, so I am going to perform for you! In fact, when I got my camera out, it seemed not to mind, and if anything, its dancing got even more vigorous, as though telling us-I like performing in front of a camera. A bird with Bollywood aspirations!

The sighting of the of the Yellow-bellied Fantail took me back to my very first sighting of a fantail flycatcher, years ago, a memory that still remains etched in my mind. I heard really a melodious call beckoning me from the forest. The bird's mellifluous song was a series of up and down tinkling call notes which went “*see-see-see-see-see*”. For me, the bird's song translated to pretty “Can you hear me sing?”! With its beautiful song reverberating through the forest, the bird needn't have asked the question-its song was riveting, and I stood enthralled hoping I would get a

look at the bird.

Following the bird's call, I finally got a glimpse of a dark chocolate brown bird, up in the branches of a tree. Even as the bird practiced its *raagas*, it began to dance and prance in front of my eyes. The bird spread its tail out into a fan, and pirouetted on the branch of the tree, turning this way and that. Not only was it an accomplished singer, but its dance movements were as graceful as they come. The singer-dancer was the White-throated Fantail. Himesh Reshmaiyya has some competition coming his way!

Dehradun plays host to three species of fantail flycatchers found in India-the White-throated Fantail (*Rhipidura albicollis*), the White-browed Fantail (*Rhipidura aureola*) and the Yellow-bellied Fantail (*Rhipidura hypoxantha*). While the first two birds are both dark chocolate brown with a series of white markings, the latter is a pretty yellow color (see photograph). All these birds have tails which they occasionally fan out while they sing and forage for food. Whilst all the three species are spectacular dancers, the petite Yellow-bellied Fantail does not sing as well as the other birds and its fanned tail is not as spectacular. The flycatchers are winter visitors to Dehradun, and come the warm months of summer, most of the birds ascend the hills to breed at higher altitudes. The birds, being flycatchers, feed on insects such as flies, bees and the like. Sitting on a perch, the birds launch themselves in the air, pluck an insect out of the air, and devour it immediately, and often, return back to the same spot.

Watching these belly dancers at work, singing and dancing their way into our hearts, right here in our homes, made me realise that we are blessed to live a city, as green and captivating as Dehradun. Lets all do our bit to keep it that way.

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

Making a difference: Conserve water at home. Brush your teeth with a glass of water, instead of using running water from the tap.

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