

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

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### The Butcher Bird

I watched the bird sitting on the telephone wire. The bird's eyes were focussed on something on the ground. I edged closer to the bird with my camera, and for a change, the bird ignored me, and remained focused on its prey. I squeezed off a few photographs. The bird swooped down on to the ground, and returned to the telephone wire with a small insect in its beak. Holding the insect in its big black beak, it proceeded to beat it to death against the wire, before devouring it. Somebody on the phone at that moment must have had a very bad line!



The bird I was observing was the Long-tailed Shrike (*Lanius schach*), one of eight shrike species found in India, and the most widespread. A common bird of Dehradun city, it is found in urban and semi-urban habitats including gardens and on bushes near homes. The Long-tailed Shrike is bulbul sized bird with a long tail. It has a grey head and back, with a black tail with rufous color on its back and belly. It looks like a bandit because it has a black eye band, neatly wrapped around its grey head, giving it a menacing look. And a bandit it is-the shrike does not hesitate to steal food from

other birds, often larger than itself. The shrike is quite bold and will allow humans to get reasonably close (unless, of course, you are a particular Sanjay Sondhi carrying a camera, which is then a different story altogether; given the difficulty I have had recently in photographing birds, I think all the birds in my area have been sent an inter-office-memo-don't allow this guy to photograph you!).

The shrike is territorial and hence can be seen hunting day after day in the same areas-typically sitting on a bush or a telephone wire. The shrike will aggressively chase away other birds that stray into its territory. Its method of hunting is to swoop down silently on prey on the ground and seize it in its beak or talons. Despite its large size, it is very agile, and sometimes will catch insects even while flying. What does it eat? Anything that moves! Insects, spiders, lizards, small birds and small rodents are all happily devoured by the bird.

On one occasion, I was watching a shrike eating a small lizard. After eating the lizard partially, it carried the remains away. I followed the bird to a thorny bush, and watched it stick the lizard on a thorn! I found numerous other “delicious morsels” similarly impaled on thorns. I had found the shrike's “larder”. Whenever shrikes catch food in excess of their needs, they create their own larder of food. Because of this peculiar habit of creating a storage shelf of “raw meat”, just like in a butcher's shop, the shrike is called the Butcher Bird.

Having a shrike near your house reflects sufficient prey base for the bird, and hence is an indicator of the quality of the habitat in your vicinity. So having a shrike near your home is a good sign. And the next time you have a poor quality phone call, don't always blame BSNL; it could just be a be a Butcher Bird at work on your phone line!

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