

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

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The “*chuck-chuck*” lizard

Sitting out on my balcony at night, watching the lights of Mussoorie twinkle in the distance provides me immeasurable pleasure. On one such night, I heard a call which went “*chuck-chuck*” just outside my house. I immediately realized that it was the Northern House Gecko (*Hemidactylus flaviventris*) calling. The gecko kept calling, and I wondered whether he was telling me-hey how about writing about me in the Doon Watch series!



The Northern House Gecko (*chipkilli* in Hindi) is a pale grey lizard that is widespread in northern and eastern India and is very common in Dehradun. My earliest memories of the Northern House Gecko involved chasing it around our house in Jamshedpur as a child. The futile chase invariably ended with the gecko taking cover behind a painting or a cupboard. In those days, I had heard the story that the gecko would fall into the milk, and poison it, hence we needed to chase it away. Nothing could be further from the truth-the gecko is not poisonous at all (and that does not imply that I like geckos in my milk!).

The gecko uses stealth to hunt its prey. On numerable occasions, I have watched the gecko sit patiently near a light bulb, while insects flit near the light, blissfully unaware, that the end is near. The gecko's large eyes are the only part of its body that moves. And in a flash, the gecko descends on the insects and gobbles it up. Often the insect is too large for the gecko to swallow, and the insect continues to struggle in the gecko's mouth, even as it proceeds to devour its prey. Reminds me of the dinosaur's eating in Steven Spielberg's Jurassic Park series!

The gecko is able to cling to virtually any surface because its toes have lamellae (plates) that have minute hair that act as suction pads. If you try and pull the gecko off the wall, they don't seem to come off and you get an idea of the power of the little suckers on its feet. It has also has very powerful jaws. If you have ever tried to catch one, you will find that it can bite as well (I can readily testify to this!). It is a real struggle to pry their jaws apart. Of course, its bite is harmless, as its teeth cannot break through human skin but my sympathies to any insect that tries to escape once caught.



The gecko, in turn, is prey for other birds and animals. Apart from camouflage, the most interesting strategy that the lizard adopts is that it can detach its tail, which keeps wriggling away, even when no longer attached to the gecko's body, thereby distracting its predator. Magically, over time, the tail grows again.

The House Gecko does a really good job of keeping insects away from your home. If you have a problem of mosquitoes or flies in your house, you now know the solution. Call me, and we will catch some House Geckos and release them in your house! And you can throw away your mosquito repellents for a “natural” solution.

Even as I wrote out the article, outside the house, the “*chuck-chuck*” calls continued. And I called back to the gecko-don't worry, you're gonna be famous-I am writing about you in Doon Watch!

PS: An anecdote about this article. My wife, Anchal said-Don't do an article on lizards! Despite her advice, I decided to go ahead. After writing it, my son, Yash called in one of his friends, an 11-year old girl named Seep. She read it and said-Uncle, it's very nice! She enjoyed the article. I hope you do, too!

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

Making a difference: Switch to natural insect repellents. Did you know that dried *neem* leaves are an effective insect repellent for your woollens?