

Doon Watch Nature Series in Dehradun Live Hindustan Times

by Sanjay Sondhi

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Winged Fairies in your Garden

Ah-the marvelous world of butterflies. Late this morning, I sat sipping a cup of coffee in our small garden. With Mussoorie in the background, I basked in the strong sunlight on a fine winter morning. Around me flitted numerous butterflies-as if quaintly asking me-are you enjoying the sunshine as well?

Butterflies belong to an order called Lepidoptera. Literally translated from Greek, this means scaled wings (*lepis*=scale, *pteron*=wing). Butterflies and moths are the only insects that have powdery scales on their wings. These scales provide the butterflies with amazing hues that make them the prettiest of all insects.

I watched these winged fairies flit about, and I felt alive. What with the sordid horror of terror in Mumbai having unfolded in front of our eyes in



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these past weeks, these peaceful winged fairies were like balm to aggrieved hearts.

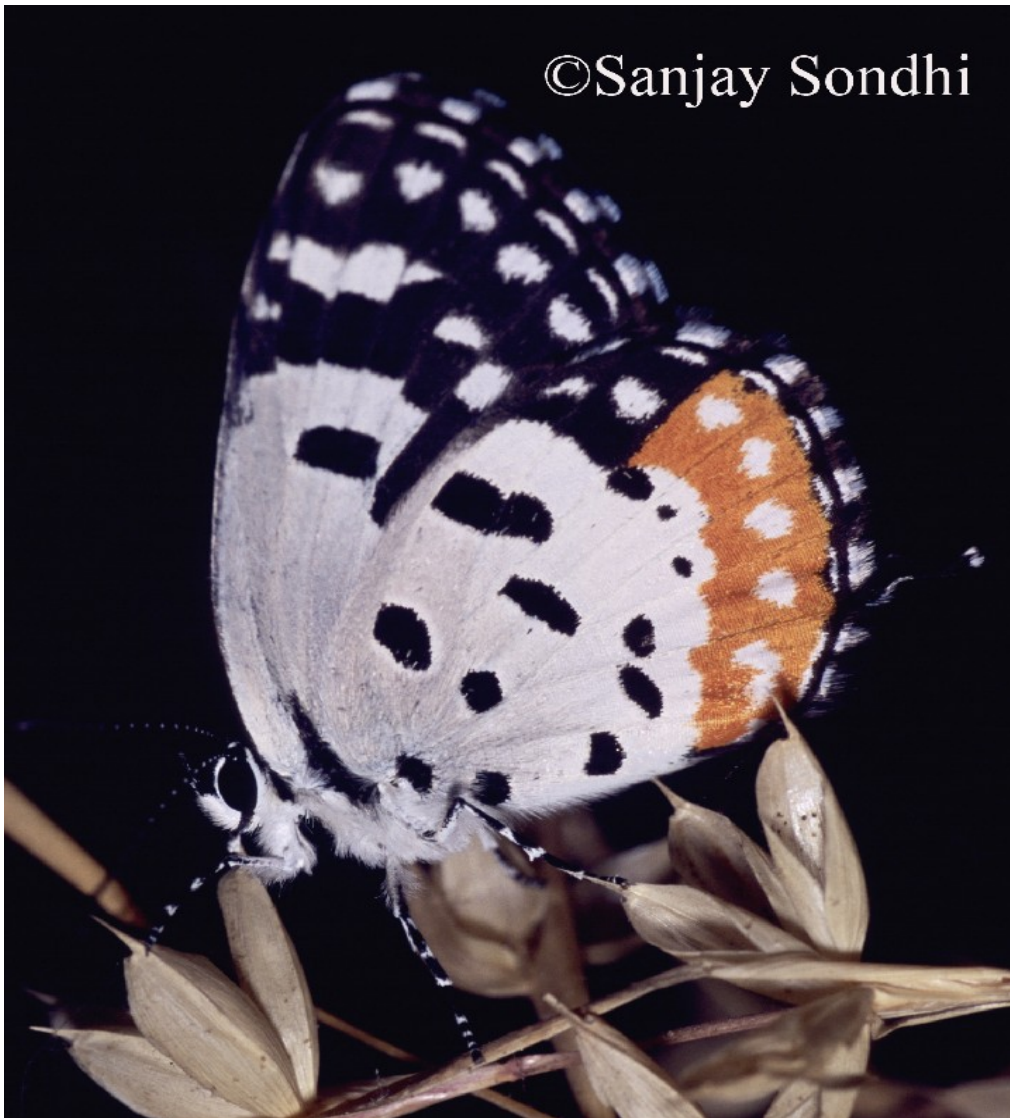
A small yellow butterfly floated by, with a weak fluttering flight. The Common Grass Yellow *Eurema hecabe* (in picture above) is a bright yellow colored butterfly which very common in gardens. It is often seen feeding in large numbers on flowers in gardens.

A black butterfly flew past me with powerful wing beats. The large black tailed butterfly with a series of white spots on the upperside of the hind wing was the male Common Mormon *Papilio polytes*. The Common Mormon butterfly displays sexual dimorphism, which means that the male and female butterflies have different wing patterns and colors. In fact, the male and female butterflies even have different flights, with the female having a leisurely flight, while the male is a fast flier; just like us males-always in a hurry!

A tiny white butterfly flitted by. On closer examination, the butterfly had a large red patch on its hind wing and its white forewing was bordered with black. The Red Pierrot *Talicauda nyseus* (in picture below) is a common butterfly that is seen in gardens, often sitting on potted plants and on occasion hovering near a car, obviously hoping for a free ride!

Timidly, a dull brown butterfly, with a hopping flight settled next to me, as though complaining-please notice me as well, even though I am not as brightly colored as the other butterflies! The brown butterfly with eye-like markings on the upper and underside, was the Common Fourring *Ypthima huebneri*. Actually being a non-descript mud colored butterfly suits it perfectly, as it camouflages it from its predators.

Did you know that butterflies lay their eggs on some very specific plants, which serve as food for their caterpillars? If you grow these plants in your garden, it is very likely that the butterflies will visit your garden. The Common Mormon lays its eggs on the curry leaf plant, *Kariya patta* while the Red Pierrot lays its eggs on *Kalanchoe*, both common garden plants. The Common Grass Yellow has many known food plants for its caterpillars but the one's that can grow easily in your garden are Indian Laburnum *Cassia fistula* and *Cassia tora* both with bright yellow flowers, very similar to the butterfly! Finally, the food plant for the caterpillars of the Common Fourring is a variety of grasses.



Butterflies silently serve mankind by being pollinators. Without insects, pollination would not occur in many plants (including many food plants) and these plants would not be able to reproduce, and eventually might even become extinct. So the next time you sit in your garden, take a moment to thank these dainty insects even as you admire them flitting about.

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Make a difference. Interested people can join the India Butterfly group (an informal group of butterfly enthusiasts promoting interest in butterflies) at <http://butterflyindia.blogspot.com/>