

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

Published on 14 Aug 2009

A Morning with the Magpie Robin

Having spent more than twenty years in the corporate world, before calling it a day, often tidbits of wisdom squeeze their way through the clutter of the forgotten corporate trainings. Yesterday, out of the blue, I recalled a statement from one of the trainers, which has stuck with me through the years. The person said “In familiar surroundings, people stop “seeing”. We often overlook the obvious. If you want to “see” things, in the most mundane settings, simply look a second time.”

I decided to apply the same to my morning nature walk close to the house. As I stepped out, the first bird I spotted was the Magpie Robin. The Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) is a sparrow-sized black and white bird seen commonly everywhere near our homes. The robin is such a common sight that, normally, I don't give it a second look. Today, I decided that I was going to give the bird a “second look” and spent a delightful morning observing the bird.

To begin with, the robin was sitting up on the branch of a tree, and did not notice me. The bird was a male, which has a black head and breast (grey in the female bird). Looking closely, I noticed that the bird's feathers were quite frayed and faded. During the breeding season, the bird needs to look at its best, to attract the female. Now that the breeding season has mostly ended, the used feathers are older and dull colored. Over the next few months, the bird's feathers will be shed only to grow new ones, to look good again.

Normally, the Magpie Robin is quite carefree, and not wary of humans. After a few minutes of watching the bird unobtrusively, suddenly the bird noticed me. Its first reaction was to glare back at me. Then it sat and preened itself, as though saying-if you are watching me, I may as well look good for you. I said aloud to the bird-I'm a guy, for God's sake-I don't really care how you look!

When a few minutes of preening did not bring the required response from me, the bird gave me a disgusted scowl and flew away. Following the bird, I

noticed that it descended near the garbage disposal outside our house. As I inched closer to the bird, it noticed me and glowered-what, you again! The bird hopped angrily towards me, let out a few harsh “*zhaaaaae, zhaaaaae*” call notes, which is its alarm call.



Cocking its tail upwards, and then pressing it down and spreading it, in no uncertain terms, the Magpie Robin conveyed what it clearly saw as invasion of its privacy. TV channels-watch out. Don't try and film the Magpie Robin!

Having communicated its displeasure, the robin winged down to the *kacchra* dump, and proceeded to feed on the ample insects there. While it gorged on its food at the dump, a butterfly, which is normally a good meal, flew close to the robin. The butterfly got a disdainful look from the robin, as though saying-easier pickings here, not interested in you, dear butterfly!

The Magpie Robin is a beautiful songster, and it has a lovely set of varied whistles, which is normally heard during the breeding season. Even as I was wondering whether the bird would sing, it flew up onto the branches of a tree, let out a series of lovely clear whistles, which I'd like to believe were solely for my benefit, before flying off into the distance.

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Making a difference: Join a nature club. Go on a Sunday morning walk. Observe birds in your garden. Open your eyes and those of your children to the wonderful sights and sounds of nature.

Photograph caption: The male Magpie Robin protesting its invasion of privacy!